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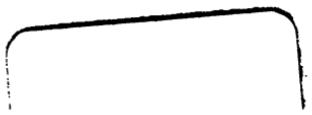
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# A MAN OF THE DAY

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ISBN 978-1-4347-0001-1  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

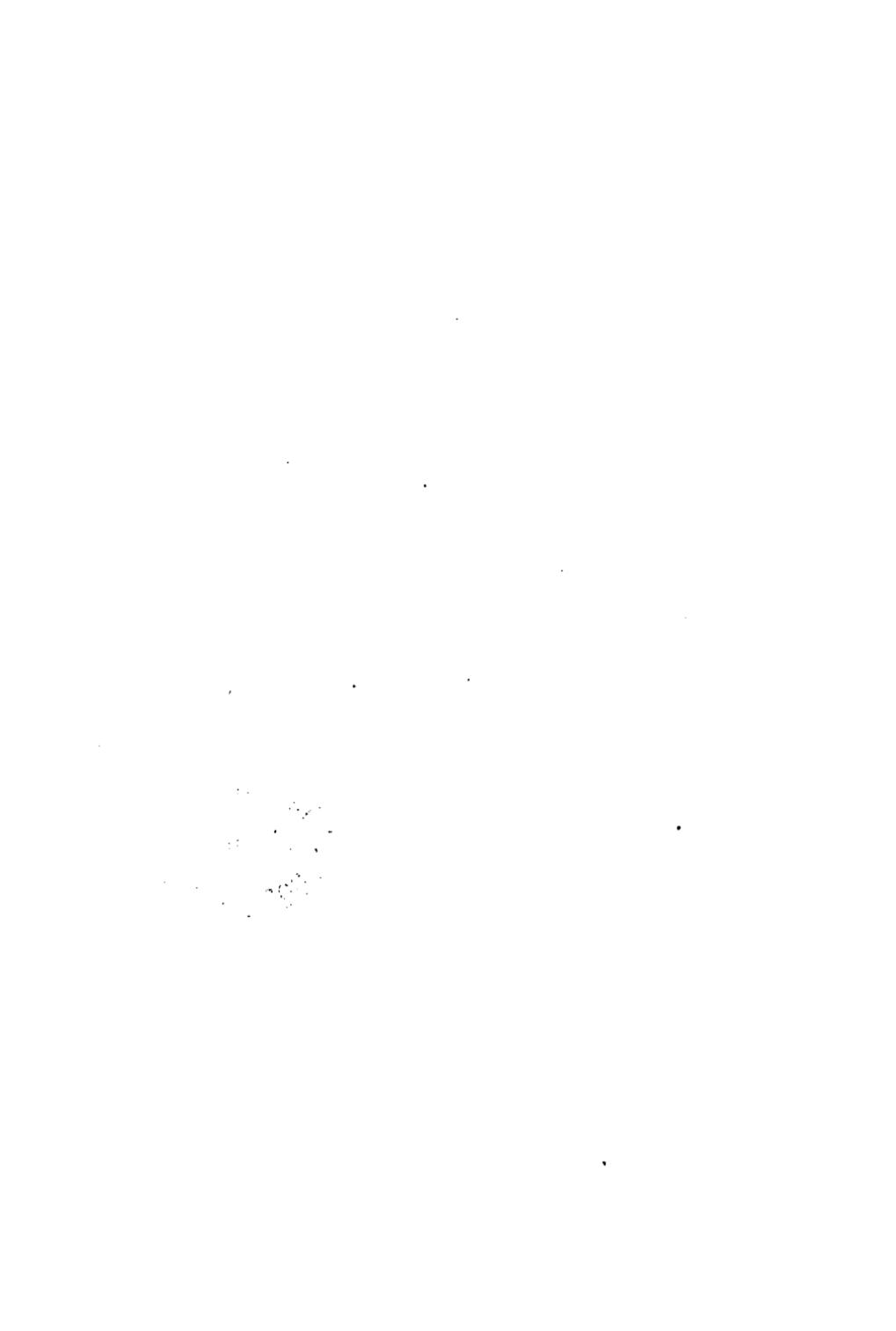






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A MAN OF THE DAY.



# A MAN OF THE DAY.

BY THE AUTHORS OF

"DAVID ARMSTRONG."

" Is there naught better than to enjoy?  
No deed which done will make time break,  
Letting us pent up creatures through  
Into eternity our due ;  
No forcing earth teach heaven's employ ?

" No wise beginning here and now,  
Which cannot grow complete (earth's feat),  
And heaven must finish there and then ?  
No tasting earth's true food for men,  
Its sweet in sad, its sad in sweet ? "

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

VOL. II.



LONDON :  
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,  
NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

1881.

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• 251. i . 411 .

**PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED, LONDON AND BECCLES.**

# A MAN OF THE DAY.

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## CHAPTER I.

WINTER had come and gone ; and the sweet spring-time, with all the memories it brought to Alick, was nearly over also.

The months had seemed terribly long to him ; hearing, as he did, so little of home and of Nelly.

Alick was unlike most men of his age ; hard work, and still more, hard thinking, had matured him, and besides this his nature was a tenacious one. A purpose once grasped, his mind refused to relinquish it in spite of all obstacles.

The aims of his boyhood were still

before him. In fact, some of them were already attained, or in a fair way of becoming so.

His dissatisfaction with the occupation of a gamekeeper had grown, rather than lessened; and what he hoped now was to be able to live by his pen alone. And did not that mean a step nearer—nearer?

It was Nelly Scott he was thinking of—for his love was as steadfast as his ambition. Short as was the time he had spent with Nelly, and sudden as his attachment to her had been, it had never wavered. Her bright and laughing face haunted his dreams waking and asleep, and her fresh young voice lingered in his ears.

At times a sadder vision banished this; but perhaps it was even dearer. The tender wistfulness of the eyes in which tears were brimming over; the pathetic rosy mouth quivering like that of a hurt

and frightened child—ah, how it all came back, and how it made his heart ache with a tenderness he had no chance to express! Did she care for him as he for her? Or was it but the first passing fancy of a young girl, too innocent to hide a feeling which had no depth, and which therefore could not last? Above all, would she not have grown to doubt him since he had never dared trust himself to revisit the place where she was, nor even to send her a letter?

He must wait, wait as patiently as he could, and as hopefully, till he had some right to seek her out; something tangible to show, in proof of the power he felt within him.

Once indeed he had sent her a message through Cameron, which he had at the time felt sure she would interpret easily, but which now he felt more doubtful about. And after all, what was a message?

So pretty a girl was sure to have many suitors! He dwelt on the advantages they would possess, with the self-torture of a jealous lover.

Would he never hear from home again? It was a terrible labour to his mother to write, and her letters were bald in the extreme, a mere statement of facts; and what interest have facts, unconnected with his sweetheart, for an absent, yearning lover?

Dick had the toothache bad; and Johnny had grown so big, a full inch taller than when you were here last year, as the marks against the kitchen door proved; and Bessie Pearson's eldest lad had run away to sea; and Farmer Dobson had hired Johnny to go with the horses, and his draught mare had taken the prize at Brentham show; but then Johnny had tied up its tail that bonny, and curry-combed it so well that it wasn't to be

wondered at ; and Maggie had grown a tall girl, and had a fancy for the dress-making !

Alick was interested in all this, as a matter of course ; but still he could not help feeling a little impatient at times. Why could she not tell him something of the Scotts, for as a family he had often inquired about them, though he did not venture more definitely to ask what he wished to hear ?

Lingham Park is a fine place ; lying far in the north, close to the borders ; and the bold outlines of the distant Cheviots lend character to the richly cultivated landscape.

It has finer soil and clearer air than the valley of the Wythe ; but Alick's heart hungered for a sight of the old home ; or, failing that, some bit of news direct from the dearly loved place.

He was sauntering along one morning

in the early dawn ; thinking even more longingly than usual of it ; when his reverie was suddenly broken by a young hare dashing close past his legs, ignoring him in its terrified flight from some more immediate danger ; and in another instant a dog followed in quick pursuit. The weak frightened little animal had no chance against its bold pursuer ; and soon Alick heard the unmistakable shriek which denotes the death terror of poor puss.

He followed up as cautiously as possible, and had the satisfaction of seeing the triumphant hunter sneak along by a hedge side, and disappear in the adjacent wood with its prey in its jaws.

A dirty yellow, mongrel-looking beast that dog was—by no means an uncommon type of poacher's dog ; but what puzzled Alick was a certain familiarity with its appearance for which he could not account. Its crouching, slinking

gait; its cunning, roving eyes; the very white spot on its cheek; he remembered them all perfectly well! But where he had seen it before, or how, escaped him utterly.

Curiosity drew him in the wake of the dog, and he walked quietly after it into the wood. There before long he came upon a recumbent form stretched upon a mossy bed under an oak, and a low growl as he approached told of the near vicinity of the canine poacher. Then in a moment he remembered. Why, of course, it was Dick Hepple's queer mongrel dog Nettle, and this was Dick himself, asleep under the tree!

Poor Dick! He must have got into low water, surely, to be brought to this. Alick wondered what had sent him out of Fordham, where he had been doing pretty well at the mole-catching, and keeping wonderfully steady, considering!

He had always been a ne'er-do-weel, a Bohemian by birth and nature, and he was sure to have a break out sooner or later. But everybody liked the fellow. He was no one's enemy but his own, as the saying went; and Alick's heart warmed to him as he lay sleeping quietly, unconscious of the scrutiny he was undergoing.

He was a link with the old place; and for that, if nothing else, the young keeper was glad to see him. He stooped and gently shook the sleeper.

"Look here, Dick, you mustn't stop here, you know," he said in a kind way, as the vagrant started to his feet, and put up his hand with a threatening gesture. "I have orders not to let any one into these woods, and I'm only a servant, old fellow!"

"I didn't know ye, Mr. Lisle, when I saw ye standin' there," answered Dick,

in an apologetic voice ; “ but, Lord, if ye knew what a life these blasted keepers lead a poor chap like me, ye wouldn’t wonder at me being a bit put out.”

“ You don’t like the keepers, then ? ” asked Alick, laughingly.

“ Like them ? As they like the hoodie crows, maybe—well enough to hang them up in a tree ! ” and Dick winked knowingly ; then glancing with disapproval at Alick’s dress, he added, reproachfully, “ but I’m blest if I hadn’t forgotten ye were one on them yoursel’, Alick Lisle. No offence meant, but whiles I’ve wondered at it ! ”

“ Sometimes I wonder at it myself,” mused Alick, thoughtfully ; then, changing his tone, he began to inquire, with eager interest, after Fordham and all the dear, dear ones there.

Dick was not a great talker, but Alick’s friendly tone moved him to frankness.

His heart often ached now, ached with a dreary sense of loneliness and misapprehension. Not all the weariness of long tramping, nor all the hardships of his wandering life, could banish the thoughts of Esther, nor his fears for her future.

Perhaps it was an unconscious sympathy of two unhappy loves which brought the men so quickly into rapport ; certain it is that before long Alick had heard all he wanted to know of Nelly Scott and her doings. How she laughed off all the young fellows who would fain have wooed her, until they grew afraid to come within the power of her bright eyes, or the sound of her ready-witted tongue ; how she clung to her home and her father, vowing there was none of them to compare with him ; and how the village gossips hinted that she must mean to look high, or had some one in her mind.

Some one in her mind! It made him glow with delight to hear the echo of this silly, simple village talk. Dear, loving, faithful little darling—of course she had some one in her mind, and easily he recognized who it was!

## CHAPTER II.

ALICK, it is needless to say, did not mention his meeting with his old acquaintance, Dick Hepple, to his uncle ; and as a few days passed without his falling in with the ex-mole-catcher again, Alick began to fancy he had left the district.

He wasn't sorry to think so, for, notwithstanding his kindly feeling to the man, he could no more trust him in the neighbourhood of game, than a house-keeper dare trust her cat with the cream !

It was never pleasant to Alick to inform against poachers ; but it would be particularly objectionable to bring any

one he knew into trouble. And though his conscience allowed him to wink at Nettle's well-known peccadillos, it would be a different matter if it came to any more serious raid on his employer's property.

But, unfortunately for himself, Dick had lingered in the place longer than was his wont. His talk with Alick had brought his hopeless sorrow more keenly before him; and even new scenes had for the time being lost their attraction. When he did move at last, it was with the intention of turning his face towards Fordham. He *must* see Esther again; must convince himself she was safe and happy. One look at her would tell him this; there would be no need for words; and after that he would be able to keep his resolution, and be off on tramp again.

In the dewy early morning he rose, and shaking himself free from the sweet-

smelling hay, he stepped out from an old loft where he had been sleeping, and set off briskly; Nettle following at his heel quietly enough for the first mile or so, while they kept to the high road. But when Dick, placing his hand on a rail, sprang a fence and struck across the fields, the poor beast—who hadn't break-fasted yet, any more than her master—found the temptation irresistible; and darted here and there after the rabbits, as they started up suddenly from amongst the tufted grass, and sought their holes in the hedgerow with as great expedition as possible.

Dick had been on his good behaviour for some time past, as far as any active infringement of the game laws was concerned; but the instinct of the poacher was in him still; and when his eye was caught by a couple of snares in a rabbit run, with scarce a moment's hesitation

he appropriated them. He had no immediate intention of using them; but a fellow never knew what he might be driven to, and anyway they had better fall into his possession than that of those rascally keepers, who were always prowling about!

The snares had been set by a raw hand, as was evident at a glance to Dick's experienced eyes, both from the height at which the loop was placed, and still more from so conspicuous a spot being chosen; it was close to the slight footpath habitually used by the head-keeper, and would, as Dick knew, be certain to be discovered by him.

Scarcely thinking more of this incident, he stepped briskly on; calling now and then to Nettle, who at first answered his call, though reluctantly, and slunk behind him in fear; but after a little Dick forgot to watch her.

He was thinking of other things.

A fresh, early summer morning, flushed with a soft, tremulous, golden light from the sun, which was slowly rising over a bank of pearly mist; a light in which every leaf, every flower, every blade of grass took a new beauty, ethereal, but evanescent. The lark, starting from his field of clover, and hovering in mid air, trilled out a matin song.

These might not affect Dick sensibly, as they would have done a nature cultured and self-conscious; but his heart became lighter, his thoughts more hopeful.

Sitting down on a bank thickly sprinkled with flowers, he took a hunch of bread and cheese from his pocket, and began to eat his breakfast.

All at once he sprang to his feet. He heard Nettle give a sort of startled bark, and then begin to whine piteously. He knew in a moment what had happened.

"It's one o' them cursed traps," he muttered; and another moment showed him he was right; for, hurrying across the field, and springing a burn which ran by the side of a plantation, he saw the poor brute in the grip of the cruel iron.

Nettle looked up at him plaintively as he drew near; but she stopped her whine, although the pain must have been exquisite, as, placing his foot on the handle of the trap, he raised the spring; and freed her torn and bleeding fore-leg from the toothed and pitiless metal, and then sent the trap flying towards the burn.

Dick tore a strip from his handkerchief, and began to bind up the mangled paw; the poor beast licking his hand as he did so. All at once two men jumped up from amongst a thicket of bracken, at a little distance, where they had been lying in ambush.

Without stopping a moment for ex-

planation, they began to lay hold of Dick, and tried to throw him to the ground. While he, starting up of course in his own defence, hit out with right good will, and called on Nettle to seize his assailants.

But he had not a chance. It was two to one, and Dick was struck to the ground almost immediately by old Taylor. His head came in contact with a jagged tree stump as he fell, and he was rendered unconscious for a minute or two.

“ What’s all this about ? ” cried Alick, coming up, and half sorry to have missed a fair fight with the poachers, if that was what had caused the row.

But a glance at Hepple’s pallid face, with a wound on the head from which the blood was trickling, and his sympathies went over instantly to the weaker side.

“ We’ve got the rascal at last that’s been setting them snares in the seed-field ! Me and Bill have been on the watch for him these two or three mornings ; but the chap’s been sly ; he’s never looked near till to-day ! ”

“ How do you know it was him ? ” asked Alick, not caring to own his knowledge of the supposed poacher ; not for his own sake, but because unfortunately he had no testimony to give in Dick’s favour, and thought it every way likely that the charge was well founded.

“ Would an honest man own a dog like yon ? ” replied his uncle bitterly ; rubbing his leg, which Nettle’s teeth had grazed as she made one feeble attempt to aid her master, before she was kicked aside.

Alick felt his gorge rise as he glanced at the poor brute lying maimed and helpless, alternately licking her wounded limb, and making futile effort to drag

herself nearer to the master she loved so faithfully.

He knew so well how the thing was done. The traps, which are a disgrace to modern civilization, even as a means of destroying vermin ; baited with carrion, and ostensibly designed to catch weasels and polecats ; but in reality with a view to the capture of stray cats and dogs that venture to obey their natural instincts.

“ Surely ye need not use him like that before ye know whether he’s innocent or guilty,” remonstrated Alick, indignantly. “ Cannot ye see he’s been meddling with the traps only to free his dog ? ”

“ Ay, that’s it, Alick Lisle ; I’ll take my gospel oath that’s all ! ” ejaculated Dick faintly ; beginning to recover his senses, and struggling vainly to get loose from the rough hands which held him so tightly.

“ A likely story that ! ” said old Taylor,

grimly. “And what do *you* know o’ Alick Lisle that ye speak on him so familiar ? ”

“That’s easily explained,” said Alick, thinking now it would have been as well to have owned knowledge of the poor fellow sooner. “I knew Dick Hepple at Fordham, when I was a lad there. He’s a mole-catcher to his trade, and I don’t know any harm of him ! ”

“Harm or no harm, I’ll not let him out o’ my sight till he’s safely lodged ; and I don’t think the better o’ you, Master Alick, for your choice of acquaintances either ! ”

Old Taylor had one of his obstinate fits, and Alick’s arguments and entreaties, and Dick’s explanations, were alike useless.

The man had been caught in a flagrant act of trespass ; more than that, he had been meddling with the traps set so skil-

fully ; if that wasn't enough to send him to gaol, the head-keeper would like to know what was ?

As poor Dick was walked off between the old keeper and his subordinate, protesting his innocence all the while, Alick stooped to look at Nettle's foot.

"Put the poor beast out o' pain, Mr. Lisle," Dick said, chokingly, at the last ; "she's nobbut an ugly-looking bitch, and she'll be as well out o' the world, sin' her only friend's gone ! "

"I'll take care of her, Dick !" shouted Alick, regardless of his uncle's wrath. For that he cared no more ; he neither could nor would stand the life longer. All his dissatisfaction and disgust had culminated, and he felt it impossible to continue there.

His resolve was taken. That very day saw his resignation tendered. Another fortnight, and he would be at liberty to

go where he pleased ; the very thought made him breathe freely again !

The atmosphere of dishonesty, small meannesses, toadyism, and petty tyranny had been choking him. He would live his own life, and seek help and advice from none.

“ A fine day’s work ye’ve made o’ this, Alick Lisle ! ” said old Taylor, angrily, when he heard his nephew’s decision ; “ and after I’ve taken sich pains with ye, and larned ye everything a keeper needs to know ; but that’s what comes o’ keepin’ company wi’ poachers and such like ! ”

“ Dick was no more poaching than you were ! ” retorted Alick, indignantly ; “ and anybody could see that with half an eye. If they saw fair, that’s to say,” he added, as an afterthought.

“ What do you mean by ‘ fair,’ ye young varmint ? ” exclaimed the old

man, now fully roused. "When did William Taylor do other than fair by any man, tell me that? Squire Crofton had a better opinion o' me than my own nephew, it seems, for he only needed to hear my story afore he gave us the warrant, and your fine acquaintance is safe enough in Morbury gaol by this time!"

"In gaol?" cried Alick, starting up. "Why, no magistrate in his senses could issue a warrant for a man trespassing only to free his dog!"

"Couldn't he, though?" and old Taylor gave a sly grin. "Squire Crofton lost too many fine hares and pheasants last season himself to be very slow at that; but there was *violence* as well as trespass, my man, you forget that!"

What was the use of arguing? How glad he felt now that he had made his mind up to be out of this! Poor old

Dick, what harm had he done? It was too bad! And Alick marched out of the room. He couldn't trust himself to say another word.

## CHAPTER III.

DICK HEPPLE's case was to be tried in due time at the Quarter Sessions ; and Alick, much to his own annoyance, was served with a summons to appear as a witness for the prosecution.

Public feeling ran high against the prisoner in the upper and middle classes ; in the lower there was pretty generally a sneaking sympathy roused in his behalf.

During the previous winter there had been a great deal of poaching carried on ; and even now, as work was scarce, many of the lower class of labourers thought little of employing part of their enforced leisure in snaring and trapping rabbits,

which at least were of use for the family dinner, though not always easily disposed of elsewhere.

Until now, however, the offenders had managed to escape scot-free ; and Lord Royston, for his part, was rather glad of this than otherwise, for the good, easy-going fellow did not like the idea of becoming more unpopular than he already was in the district ; owing indeed to no fault of his own, but to the severity of his keepers ; into whose hands he had allowed the reins of government to slip too easily.

But the magistrates were bent on making an example of any case which came into their hands, for the “rights of property must be maintained.” And had they not all game preserves of their own ?

Dick’s appearance did not prepossess them in his favour. There was a boldness and unconventionality about the

man, when he was brought before the bench ; entirely unlike the humble, cringing, hang-dog demeanour to which they were accustomed, and which seemed the right sort of thing on the part of a man in such a position, when in the presence of his superiors.

Then old Taylor, the principal witness against the prisoner, was well-known to them all, and looked on kindly, in remembrance of many an excellent battue and shooting-day under his management.

They could scarcely help themselves if their feelings were enlisted on the side he represented.

He gave his evidence in a very decided manner. Told how he had found several wires set in a field near where they had caught the prisoner, and that he and one or other of the watchers had been on the outlook for some days previously. Once they had seen a man run across the field

and leap the wall, with three or four rabbits over his shoulder ; and though they found these hidden under a lot of bracken, the man had managed to elude them ; nevertheless, they were prepared to swear that they recognized the prisoner as this man.

When closely questioned by the prisoner's solicitor, they admitted that they had not been near enough to see the face of the runaway ; but his figure, clothing, and gait had all closely resembled those of the prisoner.

Then old Taylor went on to say that, while lying in ambush, they had first observed the dog hunting with its nose to the ground, evidently on a track ; and it was speedily followed by its master, who sprang the watercourse and scrambled into the wood ; from whence they saw him throw one of their traps into the water-course. On their coming up and at-

tempting to lay hands on him, he behaved in a most desperate manner ; using his own stout stick, and calling on his dog to attack them.

The watcher simply corroborated the evidence of the head-keeper.

Then the constable, who had taken Dick into custody, was brought forward ; and he produced the two wires (which were all too easily identified as rabbit-snares) that he had found in the prisoner's possession.

Alick's blood boiled within him as he heard the false swearing of his uncle and his subordinate.

True, he had not been there at the beginning of the row, but still quite soon enough to see how it all happened ; and though the snares certainly staggered him a little, he felt perfectly sure that, in this instance, at least, Dick was innocent.

When it came to his turn to bear witness, he hesitated a moment or two before taking the oath. Could he do so, without becoming a hypocrite ? And yet by refusing he would create a prejudice against himself, and, consequently, greatly lessen the value of anything he might have to say on Dick's behalf ; and little enough that was at the best.

After all, it was a mere matter of form, and meant nothing !

He tried to give his evidence in as clear and concise a way as possible ; dwelling strongly on the fact that when he came up Dick was lying senseless ; and as for meddling with the traps, that was easily accounted for. The prisoner had evidently done so to release his dog, the state the poor animal was still in being a proof that it had been caught in the usual barbarous manner ; and as for throwing the trap into the water, it

surely was a pardonable offence in the heat of the moment.

His evidence so far had some weight in favour of Dick ; but on cross-examination he was obliged to admit not only that there was a possibility of the prisoner having been violent before he came in sight of the group, but also that he had seen Dick in the same wood, and warned him off a few days previously.

Further questioning as to what the accused was doing at that time elicited little ; but it proved to be on the same day that the other keepers had seen a man in the act of poaching ; and it seemed strange that the witness, hired to protect the property from trespass, should have omitted to mention this encounter with such a suspicious-looking character, when he heard them discussing the various signs of depredation they had come across.

To Alick's annoyance this threw dis-

credit on all his previous testimony in favour of Hepple. When in addition the watcher, who had already borne witness, volunteered the further testimony that the first thing the accused did on recovering consciousness was to address the previous witness by name, Alick found himself regarded with considerable suspicion, and that all he had said tended rather against than on behalf of the prisoner.

Of course Dick Hepple pleaded “Not Guilty;” and in defence confirmed the statement Alick had made of the case, adding the explanation of having found the snares, and pocketed them, that morning on his walk.

An explanation which it was hardly likely the magistrates could believe, and which struck the jurymen as almost ludicrous, and yet, strange to say, was perfectly true !

With scarcely a moment's hesitation the jury found the prisoner guilty, and the justices inflicted the heaviest sentence in their power; viz., three months for the trespass, deducting what he had already undergone; and three months for the assault on the keepers, while in the discharge of their duty.

Alick felt wild with indignation! This was not only on account of the slur which had been cast on his own character, but that poor Dick, by dint of false swearing and popular prejudice, should be so hardly dealt with. It was monstrous!

To have been fined for an offence of which he was guiltless would have been bad enough; but to be committed, without the option of a fine, seemed almost like straining the power the magistrates held; at least in the case of the first offence.

If that was English justice, the less

there was of it the better; and the lecturer he had heard last night was not so far out when he compared the position of the down-trodden classes below the feet of the aristocracy, unfavourably with that of the Russian serfs, before they were emancipated!

The feeling against Alick Lisle was increased when he managed to elbow his way close to the dock, and exchange a word with the prisoner before his removal.

"It's too bad, Dick; it is, indeed!" he said, in a voice of emotion. "I tried to say what I could for you, but it was no use!"

"You did your best, anyhow; but lord, what's the good? I'm not one o' the clean shaved, respectable-looking sort, and so it was sure to go agin' me!" and poor Dick gave a sort of quiet sigh. Then, with a change of tone, he added,

half to himself, "But it's little matter what comes o' me, but for one thing——"

Alick did not hear this in the jostle of the crowd, but merely had time to call out, "I'll be sure to come and see you, Dick!" before the poor fellow was marched off.

## CHAPTER IV.

SORE at heart, Alick Lisle stepped out of the court-house into the noisy street of the busy town.

His character had been blackened, and his good name sworn away; and as he met no friendly face in a town where he was scarcely known, he felt lonely, desolate, almost an outcast. But his pain arose from something more than this.

Other things being equal, he knew it was in him to face the world and its unjust condemnation.

He himself had been merely humane; had tried to get justice done to a poor and friendless man; and if he was to suffer for that—why, it was the world

that was in the wrong there, not he ! It was all of a piece with the rest of things. Injustice for ever had the best of it, and Providence was only a name invented by lucky people, who liked to believe themselves the favourites of Heaven ; and never stopped to ask why Heaven should single them out for its favours, while so many worthier fellow-creatures got more kicks than halfpence.

It was long since he had come to think, with sorrow, that if there was indeed any ruler of this muddled world, that ruler was at best a capricious one ; and, being so, was unworthy of any man's allegiance. But why, then, had he, Alick, been hypocrite enough to swear by what he held a falsehood ?

True, he had done it for a good and pure purpose ; but this did not in the least excuse him ! He had only succeeded in doing harm. Worst of all, he

had lost his self-respect for the time being. He was a liar in his own eyes, and so it was of comparatively little moment that he was a poacher's friend and a rogue in the eyes of the world !

“ Holloa, Lisle, I thought I was never going to overtake you, you go at such a pace ! ” cried a loud and somewhat grating voice ; as a heavy hand was laid on Alick's shoulder, and he turned to exchange greetings with the editor of a weekly paper, in which some of his essays had been published lately. This man was the lecturer he had gone to hear the previous night, and the one also who had first given Alick the bias in favour of infidelity.

Logically, in his present mood, the young fellow ought to have been glad to meet such a kindred spirit.

How was it, then, that his first feeling was one of repugnance ? Unconsciously

to himself what he really longed for of all things on earth just then, was to meet an honest believing soul that he could have shocked by his scepticism; and one who would have taken the trouble to contradict him heartily.

"I must just tell you at once that I'm disappointed in you, Lisle, and then we can talk quietly," said Harding, the editor of the *Banner of Freedom*. "Of all the younger contributors to our paper, I tell you candidly there was not one I had such hopes of as the writer of those daring little sketches of the future of the working classes! They didn't go quite far enough, of course. They attacked the Church, which has so largely helped to pauperize the poorer, while it has fostered the pride of the dominant classes, but they left the foundation of that church alone—namely, the effete superstition of a personal God. But they were

promising, decidedly promising, for so young a writer! We, who have gone through it all, know that it is not in a moment that the mind frees itself from the trammels of prejudice, and rises into the buoyant air of true faith. Faith in no tyrannical God, that is, but the higher faith in the onward progress of Humanity ; and confidence in its own sublime aspirations ; its own sense of right and justice ; its own true and loving impulses."

Here Harding paused, a little out of breath with his long speech, and it was not altogether the worse for his cause that he did so. For to Alick this new and sublime faith looked just then amazingly like the apotheosis of self-love, and a momentary gleam of fun lighted up his eyes as he listened to it.

But his companion was quick enough, and this humorous look did not escape him ; so dropping all at once the bom-

bastic lecturer tone, he took up instead that of the earnest friend.

“Poor boy,” he said sympathizingly, “it was a terrible temptation, I admit. I trembled when I saw you with the Bible in your hands, and it wasn’t unnatural you should yield—no, it really wasn’t unnatural! Ah, well, don’t let it discourage you, that’s all. It’s not too late yet to make a stand for truth and freedom! Dare only to be honest, and you may still be one of the foremost thinkers of the day! ”

This bit of flattery was not lost on Alick.

He was so lowered in his own esteem, so crushed by a sense of his very hypocrisy, that in a manner quite unknown by him until now, he thirsted for the good opinion of others. Yes, even for the good opinion of this man, whom somehow he could never quite manage to believe in.

"I looked on it as a mere matter of form, and it seemed cruel to let the poor fellow lose a chance for the sake of an idea," he explained. "I wonder how many of those that do take the oath believe in it any more than I do?"

"Not many, I dare say!" replied the editor, soothingly; then went on dogmatically, "If every man and woman would dare all, and speak the truth, there would not be many even nominal Christians left in old England to-morrow. But the night is passing, and the people that walk in darkness shall see a great light. The light, I mean, of that glorious dawn of liberty which is now breaking—liberty, truth, and justice!"

An odd thing this, that while disavowing the slightest reverence for the Bible, this man seemed to delight in rounding off a period with a quotation from it; and while sneering at a verse, was quite con-

tent to use it as an argument on his own behalf.

Alick did not notice this, however ; he was struck by Harding's last words.

"Truth and justice," he repeated. "By the way, that's the name I've given to a little series of papers I've been busy with at odd times—an outcry against the pitiful shams ; social, political, and religious ; with which life is full. But there, what right have I to talk of shams, and who would look at the writings of a man branded so publicly as a rogue ? The name of the author would alone serve to damn them ! "

"My dear fellow," and Harding laughed outright, "your name was worthless until now ! And, do you know, it would have been worth twenty times as much in a money point of view if you had been Hepple himself, and had to go to gaol unjustly ! The fact is, I may as well tell

you at once, that I mean to work up the flagrant injustice of which poor Hepple in the first, and you in the second place, have been the victims ; work it up into a telling article on the game laws for next week's *Banner*; and as the subject is thought about a good deal at present, this article is safe to be quoted by other papers ; and your name being already fairly well known, you will be talked of pretty generally for a while. So you see, this being the case, anything you choose to publish will attract notice ! ”

The prospect was rather alluring to Alick, although he wished he had attained celebrity any other way. Still, if he could get a hearing from the public, he felt that he had it in him to say something worth its attention. Indeed, he was sure that the essays he had spoken of needed only a little careful revision to give him a good standing, provided a

well-known publisher would take them in hand.

Mr. Harding's first idea was to bring them out in his own paper; but upon reading them over he found them too comprehensive, too wide in their views, too solid, in fact, for this. They would make a capital whole, but would not cut up well.

It was an act of self-denial on the editor's part to let them pass him, but he was capable of self-denial at times for the furtherance of "the cause."

He introduced Alick to a publisher, therefore; and in an incredibly short time the book was in the press, and advertised widely in all the papers. The publisher knew what he was about. If he did not look sharp Alick Lisle's name would be forgotten in some new sensation; and, thanks to the flaring article in the *Banner of Freedom*, many people were interested

in the young writer who had been so badly used.

As for Mr. Harding, he consoled himself for the partial loss of his contributor, while Alick was busy with his proofs. "The cause would gain popularity." No staunch believer in a heaven to gain, and a hell to escape, has more proselytizing enthusiasm than the modern denier of both !

Another comfort the editor had also, which was that he would be able to count on the author of "Truth and Justice" as one of his contributors, when the book should have brought him to the front ; and when his name would be of some definite value.

To Alick Lisle these were wonderfully happy weeks. The struggle was over for a time. There was no God—and he, Alick Lisle, was ranged amongst the prophets of the Negation. The battle

for faith had been so hard, that the first acknowledgment of defeat came as a relief. There was at least rest in it—rest, and a sense of freedom! He might think what he pleased now—or not think at all if he preferred it; which he certainly did, for his brain was tired, and his nervous system out of gear.

He had worked early and late during his intervals of leisure, when he was a gamekeeper, at the papers now in print; and shortened his hours of sleep for the same purpose. This, followed by the excitement of Hepple's affair, and then the correcting and revising of his book, left him no longer mental energy to grapple with thought, or imagination enough to realize his position.

His feelings rushed out into a new channel. He had fought with his love for Nelly Scott; fought not only with the expression of it, but with the very hold it

had taken on his heart. Now he need do this no longer !

If this book of his succeeded, he would find it comparatively easy to make a footing in even the highest class of magazines ; and then he would be able to offer the one woman he ever could love, a home.

Meanwhile, surely there could be no harm in seeing her again, and again assuring her of his love ; though, of course, he would not think of binding her to him yet—not before he was quite certain of success.

But, oh, how he longed for a breath of the dear home air—and a sight of Nelly Scott's bonny face !

## CHAPTER V.

FOR a week or two back the country had looked simply glorious. Day after day of uninterrupted sunshine had shone on the rich waving fields of corn, and the harvesting had gone on cheerily, until the sheaves stood ready stooked in the fields, and looked almost fit for stacking. Heavy rains in the earlier part of the year had brought the turnips on, and even the farmers themselves said for once, "they hadn't much to complain of." This being the very strongest expression of satisfaction a Northern agriculturist is ever known to give vent to, it spoke volumes for the general state of well-being.

But a few days changed all this. The rain came down in torrents from morning till night, and from night till morning ; and the farmers sat grumbling or silent within their houses, in enforced idleness ; or wandered listlessly into the fields to look at their spoiling grain, which was growing sodden and discoloured every hour.

In the front kitchen at Elm-tree Farm, Mr. Scott sat like the rest, gloomily looking into the fire. The weekly paper, dear to the agricultural heart (and which as often as not comprises all the reading at a farmhouse ; unless you can count the multitudinous fashion-books studied so attentively by the farmer's daughters, to keep themselves a little informed on the great feminine topic), had just come in ; but it lay on the table unopened ; and even the pipe on the hob was for once neglected.

Of all classes of men, perhaps, farmers

can rest longest doing absolutely nothing ; so, though Nelly now and again glanced at her father rather wistfully, she was not in the least surprised at his taciturn mood.

As for herself, poor girl, she was nearer to ennui than she had ever been in her life.

It was afternoon, and there seemed absolutely nothing to do save to sit still and hem those nasty coarse towels, which Mrs. Brown said she wanted for the kitchen, and even for them there was no hurry.

As for reading—why, that might have been nice enough had there been anything new to read ; but she was so sick of the tiresome little books which composed her tiny library ; and as for history and biography, they were interesting of course, only she couldn't read them now there was no one to read them to or with her ! How

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she did wish something would happen ! Something just a wee bit exciting to break through the dulness of these monotonous days, which were all so like one another !

The girl had not recognized the reason of such moods as those, but they had never come to her in the old days ; never before Alick's visit in the spring.

The nameless charm his presence had thrown over her life ; the declaration of his love for her, forced out as it was by Percy's stupid behaviour, had made her hopeful and bright for a time, and tided her over the sadness of parting.

But as the months rolled on, and he did not come again, and only sent her a message through Cameron that he was "still the same," hope seemed to fade, and left her just a trifle sadder than of old, and with a restless, unsatisfied longing in her heart.

She sat there looking wearily on the grey sky and the landscape, which appeared blurred and motiveless, like an amateur's early attempt in water-colours. Even the lichens and the mosses on the garden wall, that were wont to gleam and glow in the sunshine to every tint of silver and gold, suggesting caresses from the hand of nature—now only spoke of decay and general mouldiness. The annuals hung bedraggled and ponderous with moisture, trailed on the ground, and the great clumps of sweet-william, deliciously scented only a few days before the rain set in, were now unsightly tufts of brown and withered stalks. An apple, which had fallen upon the garden-path, added the last touch of mournful decay.

Then, too, beyond the garden where the two beautiful ash-trees had grown tall and shapely on each side of the gate of the cow-pasture, ever since Nelly could

remember, it saddened her now to look at them. For three years before, when the great storm raged so violently here, one of these stately trees had been struck by lightning; and now a blackened seam gaped all down one side of the trunk, and the dear old beauty was dying. Year by year fewer branches were clothed with green, as the sap refused to run in the withering boughs; and soon its companion would be left widowed.

Widowed? Yes, that was the word Nelly used in her thought, with a lonely girl's instinctive genius for fable.

Perhaps it said something for the germ of pure love in her heart, that her pity went out altogether—not to the dying tree—but to the one so soon to be left “All alone!”

Just like poor father had been all these years, thought Nelly, with quite a new insight into the pathos of it; and then

she looked with fresh interest at the moody old man opposite to her.

The girl had worked every lovable characteristic, every virtue, every sweetness, she ever met or dreamt of, into an ideal of the mother she had never known.

All the tenderness her life had locked ; all the refinement Percy longed for ; all the sympathy she herself now craved, in this her first conscious loneliness ; would have been given them if they had not been left motherless so early.

In her childhood, Nelly had often asked Mrs. Brown about her mother, but that good woman had parried the questions very skilfully ; and when they were repeated too often, managed to impress upon Nelly that she must on no account mention this topic to her father, because “the poor man couldn’t abide to hear her mother spoken of.”

The child grew to accept the lack

unwonderingly ; and would not notice it, save when a more thoughtful mood than usual came over her ; when she would ponder on it silently, and weave whatever of poetry and romance lay in her about that poor mother who was too dear to be talked of.

Of late she had thought more, wondering if her father had loved his lost wife so very dearly that it made him so often silent and moody, and prevented him ever mentioning her ?

“ How I wish I’d been good and sweet like what she must have been,” longed Nelly, in the innocence of her heart ; “ perhaps then I might have comforted poor daddy more ! I wonder if I’m like her to look at ? No, no, I suppose I can’t be, for I remember old Mrs. Pearson saying one day how like Percy was growing to his mother—too like, she said ! Why did she say *too* like ? And why did

she shake her solemn old head? I'm sure he isn't a bit delicate, if that's what she meant."

The girl's thoughts ran lovingly on the vision her fancy had formed; and her sweet young face grew reverent as she pictured to herself her mother in heaven, with robes of radiant white, and bearing a harp and a palm, like the angels in an engraving which hung in the best bedroom; and which were woven in with her childish dreams.

Nelly's ideas on religion were a trifle conventional, it must be confessed; and yet she could not help wondering whether, even amid the music of heaven, the mother's ear had never longed for an echo of her children's voices, and whether the dazzling beauty of her new home had never failed to compensate for the dear familiar life here; whether, even with God and His good angels, the woman's

heart never ached for her husband and her little ones? But Nelly dared not think like this too often; it seemed wicked even to speculate on such a subject.

Mr. Scott was thinking deeply too; but alas! it was facts, not fancies, his mind dwelt on—facts both foul and ugly. Would that he could forget them!

Had all these years of separation done nothing? The wound seemed bleeding yet, opened afresh by that meeting of a few months before. That wild, haggard face, and the bitter words haunted him. He knew he had been hard, and even cruel, and his conscience was ill at ease. But surely, surely his provocation had been great?

A man may forgive his brother seventy times seven—but his wife? And she? She he had been so proud of! If love and honour ever served to keep a woman

safe and happy, what excuse had she? No, no; she had never loved him, that was it! His wife, the mother of his children, had all along thought only of another!

Blind—madly blind—he acknowledged himself to have been, or he would have seen what that handsome, good-for-nothing fellow meant in coming to the farm so often, while he flattered her vanity, and at the same time sneered at country fashions, and the uncouth ways of farmers.

He might have known, too, that no good would come of harbouring a man who scoffed at the parson and the Church, and lounged about in a shooting-jacket on Sundays; and didn't know the difference between barley and Tartar oats, while priding himself on his learning. Ay, ay, but he had white hands, and the dainty, wheedling ways that please silly

women ! As for me, he mused, I could not come near her without offence ; either my clothes were soiled with going among the cattle ; my shoes kept trampling on her gay dresses ; or, if I stroked her hair, why, my hand was rough and coarsened by work, and she could not bear the feel of it on her head ; or I made so much noise, it set her nerves ajar only to hear me cross the floor ! Eh, but she was a delicate madam in those days ! But she couldn't do wrong in my eyes, for I loved her as my life——

“Father, dear, don’t be angry at me speaking of her at last,” broke in Nelly’s voice ; “but I do so want to hear her name mentioned. Tell me, do you think I’ll grow like my mother ? ”

The girl’s heart was so full of love and longing to hear, to know more of the dear one she could never see now, that the tide had broken down the barrier of

reason which had kept her silent all those years.

Taken by surprise, not remembering for the moment that Nelly knew nothing, the farmer spoke out with a passionate impulse Nelly never forgot.

“God forbid, child ! I would sooner see you in your grave !” he exclaimed ; and then, without one word of explanation, he got up and left the room.

Left Nelly alone, but thoroughly roused from her beautiful dream. “Sooner see you in your grave !” Nelly shuddered at the words. What could her mother have been to have made her father speak like that ?

## CHAPTER VI.

“ NELLY SCOTT’s grown more of a woman lately ! ” remarked the village folks, with an unconscious recognition of woman’s lot here. For, though they did not define it, the change they meant was that the rosy cheek was a shade paler, the step a trifle less buoyant and light, the dancing, mischief-loving eyes quieter, and the ringing, merry voice not heard so often in song or jest.

Not that pretty Nelly became a depressed and melancholy damsel, after the true romantic type ; moping about alone, and shunning happy and innocent

amusements as though they were snares of the devil.

The thoughtful expression which came over the brown eyes now and again was a sweet, if grave one, and Nelly was none the less a bewitching little creature because of the shadow which for a time lingered over her. It only seemed to throw her beauty more distinctly into relief.

As she went slowly and demurely down Hope Lane one autumn morning, seeking blackberries ; it would have been difficult to find a daintier picture than she formed there, with her basket on arm.

It was a lovely morning, the air full of the floating gossamers peculiar to that season, and every blade of grass and fallen leaf glistening with dew. On either side of the lane, which was a little sunken, huge sprays of bramble and briary bent down from the banks where tangled

masses of them grew, in all sorts of waving, graceful curves. The roses of course were over, but their places were not badly filled by vivid crimson hips, whose colour was almost repeated here and there by a richly-tinted leaf.

The frosts had been early and severe, and following on heavy rains, were rapidly thinning the foliage of the trees, whose branches interlaced across the road; every few seconds a leaf parted from a bough, and floated slowly and softly down to help the variegated carpet fast spreading underfoot.

Nelly's rough blue serge dress and her little country-made shoes were both damp with dew long before she got her basket full of blackberries.

It was really too provoking! The best ones always grew high on the bank, where to get them she must scramble up.

She had managed to bend down an

obstinate branch, and was stripping it of its fruit—the attitude showing all the curves of her rounded young figure to perfection—when suddenly she let it go, tearing her arm with the thorns as she did so. Little she cared for this, though, in the pleasure and surprise of the moment! She had longed and longed for “something to happen.” Well, it had happened now, and no mistake! Here was Alick Lisle back again, looking a little older and paler, but as much in love with her as ever.

Could this have been what she wished for? Goodness knows! At any rate, now he had come she was a little afraid.

“They told me you were gone black-berrying down Hope Lane,” said Alick, taking her little fingers all stained with juice into his own, and holding them tightly; “and I thought perhaps you wouldn’t mind me coming—to carry the basket, you know!”

Nelly looked up at him shyly, and then she laughed. Such a happy, rippling little laugh.

"I thought you didn't mean to come back any more," she said, softly.

"And shall I tell you why I didn't come, Nelly?" asked the young fellow, stooping to look into her eyes. "Surely you know enough to be certain it was not because the inclination was wanting, for, Nelly, while I fancied you might forget, or that others—— I was almost driven mad at the thought of it, I can tell you. I dared not come, darling, that was it."

"Am I so very terrible?" and pretty Nelly made believe to pout.

"Terrible indeed to me, while I could not yield to temptation, and tell you how dearly I love you! You remember what Percy taunted me with?"

"As if one minded what he was foolish

enough to say!" broke out the girl, impetuously. "He—I fancy he knows better now."

For some hint of Percy's love affair had come to the girl, though not so as to alarm or shock her in the least. Percy would be sure to tell her all about it himself when he came home. If he had fallen in love with the schoolmaster's daughter, as people said, why such things were so much easier told by word of mouth than written. But surely if it was so, he would be more lenient to her and to her lover—for now Nelly ventured to call Alick this to herself.

"Ah! but I do mind, Nelly," cried Alick, forgetting all his prudent resolutions. "I love you so, that nothing less than the approval of the world upon our love will satisfy me! I want to have the right to love you every day and every way, and have you for my own—my

sweetheart now—my wife as soon as possible.”

“Oh, but I never—you didn’t say anything like this before!” cried the girl, rather startled. His wife! And she only eighteen a few days ago. Ridiculous! The idea quite took away her breath.

And yet, somehow there was a charm about the word after all! She wouldn’t say no to the suggestion—at least, not at once. For it would be rude to Alick, and offend him perhaps. And then she did like him so. Besides, he only said as soon as possible, and that wasn’t likely to be very soon.

So she only blushed and looked shy, while a smile lurked around her rosy mouth. Of course this encouraged Alick’s boldness.

“But I say it now, darling; I say it now! Oh, Nelly, tell me you won’t go and be cruel to me, after all those dreary

months without you ? Say you do care for me, dearest ; just whisper it into my ear."

Surely Nelly's whisper must have been slow in coming, for the young man kept his head bent down a long time ! When it did come, however, it seemed to satisfy him, for he drew her closer to him, and kissed her passionately before he let her go.

Then they began to talk, in the eager, comprehensive, foolishly sanguine way lovers do talk occasionally.

Alick's book was just out, and his mind was full of it—at least as much of his mind as Nelly left unoccupied. He was pretty sanguine of success, and indeed had few of those alternations of hope and doubt which generally follow on the first essay of a young writer. The subject was a popular one he knew, and so felt pretty certain of at least some amount of attention.

But it was strange that, with all his talk of it and the triumph it was to win for him, he never offered to let Nelly have the book. It was dry, logical, full of statistics; not the sort of reading for her to muddle her dear little head over; although candidly he fancied it clever enough in its way. But there were other things he had written—sketches of nature and such like—which he thought would be more in her line. Some time perhaps, he said to himself, when she had grown to know him thoroughly, and so would not be liable to misjudge him, he might let her see it; now he did not feel safe enough.

Or was it not rather some unacknowledged reluctance to meddle with a faith so complete and holy as Nelly's that kept him back? Some fear that if he did so the delicate freshness and bloom might be rubbed from the beautiful soul, never to

return, which made him loth to shadow her young heart with any doubts. For even the most pronounced of sceptics seem to be more attracted by the good old type of devout, innocent, conventional maidenhood, than by all the clever, deep-thinking, bold-spoken women of their own kind.

But the knowledge that this was so brought the first cloud over Alick's happiness. For it was something too cruel to feel this. To be just brought into accord with the girl he had loved ever since he could remember; to know that she had given him the whole of her pure, loving heart, and that he might look through and through it, because no deeper mystery lay there than that newly acknowledged love for him, of which she was so shyly and prettily conscious; and then, in that very first ecstasy of happiness, to suddenly acknowledge that

there were thoughts in his own mind which would make her shudder and turn from him, if she could read them there—it was too cruel indeed! His aims and ambitions he could never share with her. She would not understand them even. And, worse than all, he felt thankful for this!

Thus it was that Alick Lisle's new bliss was shadowed, and all the glory and sweetness stolen from it, by his consciousness of the new opinions he had accepted. His brow grew gloomy, even with Nelly's little hand on his arm, and her trusting, happy eyes looking up to him.

This would never do. What would Nelly—his Nelly—think? He must make an effort to throw the sadness off.

So he began to talk gaily and hopefully of their future. Nelly told him, rather to his amazement, that Mr. Scott had

been entirely on his side at the time of the trial ; and that, instead of accepting the opinion of the magistrates, which branded and dishonoured him, her father said there was no doubt that the young fellow had been badly used, and vowed that the rascality of those keepers beat everything. This was a good deal from such a stern, quiet-spoken man as John Scott, and comforted Alick not a little.

He knew that his position did not as yet admit of a very close scrutiny, composed as it principally was of hopes for the future ; but still Alick had begun to make money, and Farmer Scott was a tolerably far-seeing man.

The basket was by no means full of blackberries as the lovers went slowly back to the farm, and Mr. Scott looked rather amused at the small results, for so long a time consumed in the picking. He could not fail to take in the position of

affairs, noting Alick's proud and satisfied looks, and Nelly's blushes and confusion. But he did not seem at all angry, nevertheless.

"Come in, lad, and tell us the rights of your row with the keepers," he said, pleasantly enough. "Dick Hepple was a deal too hardly used, poor chap; and you didn't get off very much better yourself, I reckon; but we would like to hear your story, Alick."

Of course Alick Lisle was only too happy to accept this invitation.

## CHAPTER VII.

MRS. LISLE took the news of Alick's having thrown over all his prospects of following in his uncle's footsteps, better than he could have expected.

The good woman's feelings were of so mixed a nature, that even she herself did not seem very definite over them ; and indeed, for the first week or so after her son's return, was much quieter than usual.

She was sorry Alick should have quarrelled with her brother, "especially when he'd none of his own, and must ha' saved a mint o' money," as she lamented pathetically ; but then her motherly in-

dignation had been thoroughly roused at the way the lad had been treated, and helped her over this trouble wonderfully.

"It wasn't as if he'd been one o' them fly-away sort o' chaps, as hardly knew when they spoke truth or falsehood ; but our Alick, who was terrible steady and cautious as to what he swore to, and would hardly let a body say a thing for fear they might be mistaken. But there was one thing sure, he could hold up his head wi' the best on them, and be beholden to nobody, since his book-larnin' had come in so handy."

For nothing gave Mrs. Lisle greater delight and wonder, than the thought that her Alick, the boy whom she had alternately caressed and scolded, had become clever enough to write books which were actually printed ; and which, stranger still, people would pay money for.

Without the latter fact, perhaps, she

would have found it difficult to believe in her son ; with it, her simple awe and motherly pride were boundless. She could not for the life of her avoid giving glowing and exaggerated accounts of his greatness to a few of her cronies ; and the village folks looked with interest and respect at the wonderfully clever young fellow who had risen from amongst them.

Perhaps some of these rumours had reached the ear of Mr. Scott, who thought there could be no smoke without fire ; and if so, they made him tolerably complaisant to the wooing which was going on before his very eyes.

Night after night Alick Lisle found his way to the farm, and sat and smoked a pipe with the master of it, while Nelly sat by with her knitting, each happy in the very nearness of the other.

Then by-and-by they would be left alone, while the farmer went his nightly

rounds amongst his beasts, and very sweet were these quiet evening hours.

It is not to be supposed that Alick's proud and elated mother could fail to comprehend the reason of these frequent visits ; and though she tried very hard to look as if she suspected nothing, the attempt was a complete failure.

At last one afternoon, when Alick had been telling her a little of his plans for the future, and helping her in advice about the younger ones, her heart grew too full for longer silence.

“ Eh, Alick, lad, but yer mother does feel proud o' ye now ! To think o' ye bein' only a bit keeper body the other day, and now very near a gentleman ; forbye bein' cleverer than ony o' them hereabouts. And to think of the bonniest lass in the whole place pickin' a fancy to ye and her turnin' up her nose at young Watson o' the Knowe, and him that well

to do, that any other lass would ha' jumped at him. Not that it doesn't serve him right, too, for he's one o' the close-fisted kind; and I mind when the wages of the womenfolk were raised from a shillin' to fifteen pence a day, he was the only master in the country side that stood out agen' it."

Alick turned away rather impatiently. He was not yet prepared to discuss his love with his mother. It was too strange, too sacred a sentiment, to bear the common light of day to the extent that he knew she would bring upon it.

But Mrs. Lisle was not to be daunted.

"Tut, tut, Alick, surely your mother may speak if any one may? For I will say this, I've always known how to keep a close tongue i' my head, and never was a tittle-tattle to spoil things afore they're settled! But ye never could bear to talk yer affairs over wi' your mother as ye

should ha' done ; that I must say, Alick, considerin' what a mother she's been to ye."

"There's nothing to talk over, mother —nothing definite, I mean," said Alick, quietly, and his mother was appeased.

"Nothin' definite," she repeated, with a knowing nod of her head and a satisfied laugh. "A body need not be very clever to guess what that means. But one thing's definite enough to satisfy even yer mother, Alick ; and that's the certainty that Nelly Scott 'll have a good providin' whoever's lucky enough to get her. Now that that soft-spoken idle lad has made such a fool o' himsel' owre auld Grey's daughter, and browt shame to a decent man's door, Mr. Scott 'll neither be to hold nor to bind when he hears on't, and there's little fear o' him comin' round very soon ; for he's gae stubborn is the auld man, and no mistake. And

anybody can see wi' half an eye that 'll make it all the better for the one that's left i' the end ; for Nelly's been a down-right good lass to him, and he's safe to remember her for it. Them that's fond on her 'll do well to make it all safe as soon as they can ; secin' how keen the young fellows are after a bit o' money."

"Oh, mother, for mercy's sake, don't talk like that!" broke in Alick, impatiently ; and much to his mother's amazement, he walked straight out of the room. But she consoled herself with the thought that lads were always a bit sheepish over their first love affair ; and had not the faintest idea that she had shocked and affronted him.

The young fellow was in a towering passion. He could make all due allowances for his mother ; but really this was too much ! He could not stand another speech like the last, if it was to save his

life. He felt as though, after the mercenary light which his mother had thrown upon their position, he had no right to go near Nelly again.

His pretty, loving, tender Nelly ! Why, he had loved her ever since she was a child ; ever since he could remember almost. If ever there had been an idyllic and simple and true love affair, surely theirs was one. And, then, to have such mean and sordid notions given to it—it was too much ! It was an insult to Nelly even to suggest such an idea.

But after he had taken a long, solitary, rapid walk, and smoked a pipe or two, Alick cooled down. He would be more than foolish if he allowed any little stupid speech like that to interfere between Nelly and himself. Better be misjudged by the world, than cause one pang to her loving heart. For she did love him with all the fresh, unbounded affection of a

young, unsophisticated nature; he felt sure of that.

Indeed, all the irritation passed from his mind when Nelly and he were again together; and nothing remained but an added tenderness from the knowledge that they must part, and that soon.

He had lingered inactive long enough. If his mother's words had no other effect, they had at least roused him to a sense of that. He must be up and doing, if he meant to win a position and a home for Nelly.

He would begin to work at once on a series of papers, which he had promised to contribute, on "Pauperism," to "Modern Thought," the last high-class magazine, started by a set of unconventional and scientific men. It was a splendid chance to show his power, and he felt very anxious to make the articles exhaustive.

To do this he must have facts, and be perfectly sure of their truth ; and though he had already gone carefully into the details of the present system of relief as it works in the metropolis, he needed still to study it in its relation to the provinces ; and how could he collect, much less authenticate the necessary data, in such an Arcadia as Fordham ?

So all at once he made up his mind that it would be well to leave there ; and as it would be a terrible wrench, the sooner it was over the better. He would go to-morrow.

Nelly looked tearful when he told her that he had come to say good-bye ; she bent her head over the stocking she was knitting, but Alick saw all the same.

“ He’ll not be long before he’s back,” said Mr. Scott, significantly, glancing over at his daughter. The old man felt that he, too, would miss something when the young fellow was gone.

Nelly was a good lass, as good a lass as ever lived; but it grew monotonous, having none but a woman to talk to.

“Go with me to the door, Nelly,” whispered Alick, as he said good-bye to Mr. Scott; and the girl laid down her work, and went out into the porch with him.

It was a dark, cold night, and the wind came and went in wailing gusts, rattling the leafless branches of the trees, and the woodbine stems which twined about the porch. But little heeded the lovers the cold or the darkness; Alick only folded the old cloak, which he had caught from a peg in the passage, closer round Nelly, and drew her nearer to him, while he told her how much he would be thinking of her always, every day and every hour; and how he hoped she would do the same of him; and how their parting should not be for long if he could

help it, for he meant to win name and fame before long ; and then—then—did she think she cared enough for him now to go out into the world with him, and be his darling, his loved and cherished wife. And Nelly's shy answer was lost in a long, lingering kiss.

“ How is it you love me so, Alick ? ” she asked, after a moment's pause. “ I am not clever a bit, and you—you know so many things. What made you care for me, I wonder ? ”

“ How could I help it, darling ? You are so pure, so sweet, so innocent ! I think it was your perfect innocence attracted me first, do you know ; you seem never to have been brought near to sin ; never to have been sullied by even the knowledge of it ; and I feel as if I could curse any one who brought such knowledge to you , ” answered the young man, clenching his fist at the idea.

“Oh, Alick, how foolish you are! I am not such a saint as you make out. Oh, what is that? Did you ever hear such a strange sound?” and the girl clung terrified to her lover, as a long, sobbing sigh seemed breathed out into the night close at hand.

“It’s nothing but the wind whistling through the porch overhead,” said Alick, reassuringly. “Why, what a little coward my Nelly is!”

“Oh, but it must have been more than that,” persisted the girl, breathlessly; “it sounded like nothing I ever heard before, like a sigh from a broken heart, or something like that.”

“Nonsense, darling; I mustn’t have my sweetheart getting nervous and imaginative while I’m away from her;” and Alick pooh-poohed the sound which he had not heard; or hearing, took for granted as a natural one. He managed

to reassure Nelly, too, before he left ; which he did at last with reluctance.

He found her shivering a little, when his own inconsideration struck him, and he called himself a selfish brute for not thinking only of her.

“ Not another moment, darling,” he said, hurrying her into the house ; “ it won’t be long before we meet again.”

As he waited a moment to light his pipe, he fancied he saw a shadowy figure cross the little garden path in front of him, and steal round the side of the house. There was no light, save for the few stars which had just struggled out from behind a veil of clouds, and he might have been mistaken, but it certainly gave colour to Nelly’s fears.

Then he comforted himself with the fancy that it could only have been some prying maid-servant trying to overhear their talk, and so went quietly home.

But it was no fancy, for a woman was hurrying away in the darkness, wringing her hands, and wailing as she went. “Too good and innocent even to touch me—though I am her mother, her guilty, miserable, heart-broken mother! But it’ll not last long now, that’s one comfort, even the worst lives come to an end sometime. Oh, God, why hasn’t mine been done with sooner—it’s been bad enough—bad enough He knows?” and with a groan she staggered on through the night.

## CHAPTER VIII.

IT was a night in October, and winter seemed already setting in ; for the trees were leafless, the air keen and cold, while even the roads were hard and frostbound.

A bright fire burned in the little sitting-room of the school-house, and by it old Adam Grey sat reading his weekly paper.

Tea was over, and Esther moved softly about, clearing all traces of it away, and putting the room into order. Meanwhile her father read the weekly budget of news ; and then, pushing his spectacles up on his wrinkled forehead, thought things over, and prepared his strictures

on the Government and the world in general, before stepping along to the Black Bull, where his wont was to repair every Saturday night for an hour or two ; and while indulging in his moderate potation of a couple of glasses of toddy, he would enlighten his rustic neighbours on the affairs of state. He pointed out the bad management shown by the Government, and pointed out too how he would have avoided such and such a blunder, had fate been wise enough to have made him Premier instead of village schoolmaster.

Esther, when she had finished her little household duties, took up a long grey worsted stocking, and seated herself at the window, where a faint light still lingered. The sky was clear, and she liked to see the stars peep out one by one.

Mechanically she kept knitting away ;

but her thoughts were busy with the past.

Only a year ago—a year that night since her lover's lips had met hers for the first time—and, oh, how much had happened since then. A few months of innocent happiness, all too short; a still briefer time she dare not recall; then long, long months of loneliness and fear since Percy had left her. And now! She lived from day to day in a sort of stupor. Her very power of suffering had exhausted itself in the beginning of her mental agony. Imagination, feeling, nay even shame itself, were benumbed by the blow which had killed hope in her.

“What matter what came of her now?” she said to herself; and with the callousness of despair, she awaited her doom; making no effort to silence the gossiping tongues she knew to be busy with her name, and only wondering that her secret

—secret no more—should be so long in reaching her father's ears.

The one thing she wished for during those last miserable weeks was that the worst would come, and that he knew.

His sublime egotism and unfailing selfishness left him no leisure to notice that the girl's cheek was growing paler, and that her voice no longer had the ring of life and hope in it; but instead, the dull monotonous tone of one who speaks in the chamber of the dead. He did notice, however, that she had given up “gadding about” in the twilight; that her poetry books were never opened now, and that her domestic duties were performed with unwonted punctuality, even for her—the result of mere mechanical habit, but which seemed to him the very perfection of order.

“She had never been to say an unmanageable lass; but really she was

growing almost like himself now—putting away all the silly fancies that were only to be looked over in a child ! ”

How was it possible that a man so content with himself and his belongings should ever imagine a daughter of his could do anything unworthy of the name she bore ?

For the last moment or two he had glanced towards her approvingly. The candlelight fell only on her busy hands, while the red window-curtain threw her face and figure into shadow. His thin lips parted with a smile of satisfaction at her industry.

Then, as the girl rose to help him on with his overcoat before he set out for his walk across the village green to the river, he even pressed a lean, chilly forefinger gently on her cheek ; and as he did so, noticed for the first time its terrible pallor. At this a momentary recollection

of his sweet young wife flashed across him, and he sighed a little.

“ Dear me, how like Mary she does grow,” he thought; “ I hope to goodness she’s not going to turn weakly too ! ”

The schoolmaster’s presence at the Black Bull was always looked on in the light of an honour, and his “ book-larnin’ ” regarded with great respect; but it must be confessed that the talk was a good deal more lively and social when he did not form one of the circle. So, although he was always greeted very deferentially, and voted to the seat of honour (the armchair on the side of the fire furthest from the door), it was with something like a sigh of relief that the men drew their seats closer to each other, and called for an extra glass all round, as soon as ever the old man’s back was turned. Luckily for their joviality, he usually kept to an early hour for

retiring, and had never been known to exceed his couple of glasses.

Then at once the subject he had been forcing on their unwilling ears would be dismissed with significant shrugs of shoulders, and half-pitying, half-contemptuous comments. “Likes to hear hisself lay down the law, poor auld chap!” would be uttered in a tone which implied that the speaker wondered at the bad taste, which he assuredly did not share.

Politics, the schoolmaster’s stock subjects, were not the more popular for his lectures ; indeed, they were regarded much in the same light in which a certain worthy Scot looked upon religion when he exclaimed, “He didna’ see what it had to do wi’ the common affairs o’ life ava’ ! ”

The weather, the crops, the markets, and the multitudinous scraps of village

gossip were then discussed eagerly, interspersed with occasional sallies of wit, the points of which were invariably personal.

The old schoolmaster held his head higher than ever when he entered the inn. He was pleased with himself; pleased with his daughter; pleased, most of all, with his own unusual tenderness to her, and the look of pathetic meekness which had come into her eyes at his approach to a caress.

Fresh from the biting outer air he stood for a few moments in the passage, divesting himself of his wrappings, and sniffing, not ungratefully, the warm odours of spirituous liquors wafted out from the half-open door of the parlour.

There was a hum of conversation within; but the voices seemed more subdued than usual. Not until he had hold of the handle of the door did the old man

get any hint of what formed the subject of talk.

Suddenly he stopped short. Was that his daughter's name he heard?

Good Heavens! It could not be possible that any man there would mention his quiet, modest Esther in such a tone?

Another moment and Adam Grey shook from head to foot, and would have fallen, had not he clutched the door handle convulsively.

"Ay, ay, the lad has his mother's blood in him, no doubt! But who'd ha' thowt it o' such a haughty queen as yon?" And the speaker ended with a coarse, significant laugh.

"Nice pastime, gentlemen," broke in a hoarse, half inarticulate voice. "Can ye get nothing better to do than try to rob a motherless girl of her good name?"

The men looked round simultaneously.

There stood the schoolmaster close behind them.

His face was working, and his grey head was thrown up—no longer in complacent self-esteem, but in indignant protestation of his daughter's honour and purity.

A silence fell upon them. What, indeed, could they find to say? After all, it was only the truth they had spoken, though they little dreamed of the ears it would reach.

They were kindly-natured men for the most part, however coarse and unrefined. Not one of them but wished the words unsaid.

The old man stood a little while, regarding them with fierce looks; and then, bringing his hand down upon the table with a blow which made the glasses upon it ring, he cried out, “By God, you shall eat your words, damned liars that you

are, every one of ye ! Was there no bold hussy in the place whose name you could drag into the mire, that you must use my pure, quiet-spoken girl's in such a way ? ”

“ Poor auld chap, he does take it terrible hard,” commented one of the drinkers to his neighbour, in an audible whisper.

Then one or two of the others tried to soften the impression produced.

“ They'd heard it ; but for their parts, they'd thowt it could scarce be true. All the same, he shouldn't be too severe on them for talkin' ower among friends what all the village said long enough ago.”

Somehow the whisper he had heard brought the first doubt to his own mind ; and the moment that doubt came, Adam Grey's mood changed.

There was something of pathetic appeal now, instead of fiery indignation, in the

way he turned to an old crony on his left hand.

“George Dodd, we’ve been friends, ye and me, ever since I came first amongst you—can ye sit by and not contradict them to their faces, when you, at least, know what the lass really is?”

His voice faltered and broke as he said this, for he saw in his crony’s face a bitter, bitter truth. Dodd put his hand on the other’s arm appealingly.

“Don’t be ower stern to the girl, Grey,” he said, quietly; “she’s but young yet, poor thing! And the lad’ll be safe enough to marry her, I’ll warrant,” he added soothingly.

But such consolation as this was worst of all to bear, and Adam Grey tottered out of the room, crushed and broken down.

He saw they all pitied him. Pitied *him!* God knows he had never expected any one would have to do that! He had

come of a respected and honest race, and never till now had disgrace been connected with the name he bore.

And Esther—the girl he had been so proud of! He now knew that he had been fonder of her than he had ever confessed to himself, or shown to her. His dead wife's baby, the little one ~~he~~ had brought up so strictly, to come to this!

His brain seemed whirling round. No, no, it could not be true! With the remembrance of his dead wife, came a vision of her purity, her exquisite devotion, her sublime unselfishness. Strange that he should never have recognized the beauty of his wife's nature until ~~he~~ was so rudely awakened out of his self-absorbed egotism.

The night had grown colder, and the piercing wind went through him, for he had forgotten to put on his overcoat

again. He seemed to grow numb and powerless before he reached the door of the house he had left so proudly only a short time before.

It was not dark, and yet he groped about before he found the latch at all ; and when found, fancied it difficult to raise.

The light was burning brightly in the tiny room ; and the snug, comfortable look of things gave him hope for a moment. It all seemed too comfortable, too home-like for so great a tragedy. But one glance at Esther as she rose and stood before him, the colour driven from even her lips with sudden alarm, and no confession was needed.

Their eyes met, and all was told.

The girl tightened her grasp on the back of a chair for support, as her father stepped forward, his white face set and hard ; but before his lips could form one

word of denunciation, she threw up her arms.

“Don’t curse me, father! Don’t curse me, for God’s sake and my mother’s!” she cried in agony, and fell forward, fainting at his feet.

## CHAPTER IX.

THE next day a woman was crossing the high land which lies between the Wythe valley and the manufacturing town of Wrekenton. The road runs along the sides of some rather steep hills.

Never, even in their full glory of fern and heather and summer sunshine, did the great, lonely, desolate fells look finer than on that late October day. There is a sombre majesty about the season, which seems to suit the melancholy character of Border scenery better than the merely pretty charms of earlier months. Nor is there any lack of colour, although it may be of a sad and quiet sort. The rich

golden brown of the bracken clothes the hills as with a brocaded mantle, and great grey boulders crop out of this here and there, subduing and harmonizing it.

The burns, which in summer are mere threads of water, are swollen now with the autumn rains, and have gained new and restless life. They come tumbling and foaming down the steep fell sides on their way to the river ; sometimes, however, resting a little on the levels ; where they form still, solemn pools, fringed by ruddy-tufted rushes, and frequented by the heron and bittern.

The woman turned now and again, and looked back with a lingering, longing gaze at the little village lying down in the hollow ; then went wearily on.

The fitful gleams of watery sunshine and huge masses of driving cloud were splendid in their scenic effects, but they prophesied a change to storm soon.

The keen, cold, pure air pierced through the poor garments of the traveller, and she kept drawing her thin, threadbare cloak closer about her; showing sharp outlines of shoulders, and limbs lean and starved-looking. She had apparently not strength enough to walk at a pace which would keep up the circulation, and shivered every few minutes as though with ague. Then, too, dreadful fits of coughing would seize her, and she would be forced to stop until they were over; sinking down exhausted by the roadside.

But still she persevered; and with a sort of dreary patience, neither groaned nor murmured; though had it not been for a lift of several miles, given her in his spring cart by a good-natured butcher, she would have failed to reach her destination that night; and even as it was, before she gained the brow of the hill overlooking Wrekenton, the early twilight

had fallen, and the lights of the busy town began to twinkle out here and there.

Panting and gasping for breath, she paused here; in fact, her feet refused to carry her further without a rest. So she sat down on a stone, and gazed with a blank and vacant expression down at the roofs beneath her. There was enough in her mind to have made any woman weep tears of bitter sorrow and remorse, but this one's eyes were dry. Perhaps she had wept them all away while she was young and comparatively innocent, and there were none left now that they were so needed.

As she sat and looked out into the gathering darkness, her face seemed to set and harden, and she muttered a curse between her lips.

“It would serve him right if I died out on the roads here, and they found out

what I was to him, after all!" she said, slowly, but with bitter meaning. "Lord, what I would give to see his face when he had to speak up before the coroner and the rest of them! Why, I don't believe he'd ever bring himself to forgive me, though he does go to church regularly, and have family prayers every night!" she went on with terrible irony, ending with a laugh worse to listen to than any oath. Then her mood changed, and she sighed. "What's the good of blaming others when it's one's own bad life that's done it? And if there was a scandal, it wouldn't be him that would suffer; but the poor innocent ones, those I'd die to save any day!"

This thought made her rise hastily, although her limbs shook under her.

"If I can only get safe there," she said. "There's not a mark of any kind on my clothes, and I don't believe

they'd be able to trace me ! Oh, dear, my poor head, how it swims ! I can hardly recollect where the place lies. Oh, yes, now I remember. It's on this side of the town. I can surely reach that ? "

Once on her feet, she managed to descend the hill ; stumbling and falling now and again, but still keeping straight on.

At last the great blank wall was reached ; and ringing the bell, the poor worn-out creature sank on the steps ; thinking, no doubt, that she had gained the only haven of refuge, in which such miserable creatures could claim shelter ; and that surely from this poor haven no one would drive her away.

A workhouse ! There is nothing so very tempting in the sound, that one should fancy its portals guarded with as much jealous care as those of a palace.

Yet when the gate slowly opened, and the old man who was acting as temporary porter—in the absence of the true official—peered out at the woman who lay on the threshold, and who stumbled to her feet, and held out her hands in mute appeal; he looked as cross, and pompous, and domineering as though he had been the guardian of a ducal home.

“Where’s your order?” he asked, in a gruff and peremptory voice. “What’s the good o’ humbuggin’ here without showin’ that?”

“I haven’t got one,” gasped the forlorn creature; “but you must let me in—you must indeed, for I am all but dying—all but dying!”

The deputy porter shook his head.

“It’s no manner o’ use!” he said angrily; “ye must be off and get one, or in here ye don’t come this night!” And with that he slammed the door.

Then at last the dreary submission of the woman gave way. She wrung her hands despairingly, and a lump seemed to rise in her throat, and choke her.

"How can I get an order, when I couldn't stir a step further to prevent me dying here now? God help me, there is no one to give shelter to such a sinful wretch—even the poorhouse is denied me—*me*, who was once a lady!"

A frantic hysterical passion seized on her, and with unnatural strength she began to beat at the door in a frenzied manner, and to sob and scream, until perfectly exhausted; when she sank down once more on the stone steps in a swoon of weakness.

## CHAPTER X.

THE clear, cold, pitiless darkness came on and found the woman still lying there motionless.

But after a long interval of unconsciousness—merciful, numb, overpowering unconsciousness—she came back at last to a sort of faint, feeble, fluttering life; and found herself no longer alone in her misery.

The gaslight, streaming across the path, fell full upon a tall dark figure which leant against the wall; and upon a white face, which stood out from the gloom as though it were finely sculptured

marble. The eyes looking down at her from this face terrified the woman. They, at least, were not the eyes of a statue, for the intensity of misery in them was startling ; and the more so from force of contrast with the extreme youthfulness of the countenance.

As the woman gazed up at them a strange fancy came to her. The last impression before she swooned was that death was coming, and the first reawakening of thought linked itself to this impression. The poor creature fancied she had now passed into another world.

The eyes looking upon her were those of an avenging angel bearing the message of her doom.

But surely there was pity mingled with the despair of which they were so full ? The woman held out her hands appealingly.

“ Who are you ? ” she cried in a broken

voice. "They always told me that the angels were happy, but you—you look sad instead! Is it only that you are sorry for me? If you are so sorry you cannot be very hard. Does it pain you even in heaven to know we are out here in the cold and darkness?"

Esther Grey, for it was she who stood there, moved forward and pillow'd the head of the poor half-delirious creature upon her shoulder.

"Rest there," she said softly; "rest there, you poor thing—since there seems no other refuge left for you!"

The woman wondered a little at this.

"How good you are to me," she said feebly. "Why, surely God will be more forgiving than they make Him to be—since even the angels are so pitiful!"

Then she grew still again; and as Esther Grey sat chafing the benumbed hands, the woman's senses came gradually

back to her, and she began to bemoan the cruelty with which she had been treated, and told how she had been refused admittance.

“We will try again, or you will perish with cold,” said Esther quietly; and rising, she rang the bell.

As she did so the older woman got a full view of her for the first time.

“You’re not fit to be out yourself, poor young thing,” she remarked sympathizingly. “Is there no one to look after you?”

“No, no; I have no claim on any one,” replied Esther, in a dull monotonous voice.

“Then why don’t you curse *him*, girl? It’ll do you good. Curse him as I once did. I’ll—I’ll help you!” cried the woman with sudden fury.

“It’s myself and my own folly I ought to curse—if cursing could do any good,”

replied Esther, still in the quiet tone of calm despair.

“ What ! Is it you again ? ” grumbled the door-keeper ; as he opened the gate about a foot, and put his head out reluctantly. “ And you haven’t got no order yet, that I’ll swear ! Oh, and there’s another on ye now, is there ? Where’s *your* order, young woman, eh ? I’d like to know that.”

“ It’s too late to get an order to-night —even if either of us had strength enough to try for one,” answered Esther Grey, in a low but firm voice ; “ but you are bound to let us in, you know ! Look at this poor woman, how very ill she is.”

“ Oh, yes, a likely story ! That’s what they all say,” retorted the official indignantly. “ My business is to obey orders, not to palaver with the likes of you ; so you had better both be off out of this pretty soon, or it’ll be the worse for you,

that's all!" And with this the worthy representative of Bumbledom drew in his head, and the door again closed on the wretched shivering women.

They then crouched down upon the steps, as close into the doorway as possible, to shelter from the nipping wind ; and huddled together for warmth and mutual support.

During the earlier part of the night two or three people passed along the footpath. But they were for the most part business men hurrying home to their suburban villas. What time had they to spare, or pity to waste on a couple of miserable tramps—evidently waiting to be let into the casual ward ?

The stars came out clear and bright, for the night was a frosty one, and still the two women sat on there ; only a low moan breaking the stillness now and again.

At first they tried to soothe and com-

fort each other; but as the slow hours dragged on—those slow hours of agony which left their impress upon Esther Grey's young life—they grew too weary even for this. Only they tried to see each other's faces, or groped with weak clinging touch for each other's hands.

Some strange resemblance of face and voice haunted yet eluded Esther in her companion. Whose were the familiar tones which rang in her ears?

Then all at once it came to her, and the mystery was solved. With a passionate sob she clung convulsively to her fellow-sufferer.

“Oh, how very, very like you are! And yet I couldn't see it before,” she cried; betraying the vein of thought she was following.

“Like! Like who?” questioned the woman, but she got no answer. The girl's reserve had returned, after the first

startling shock was over. Besides, the cold was having its usual effect, and a queer drowsiness was creeping over Esther, which made her feel dull and stupid.

Some remnant of tender womanhood and motherliness must have lingered in the breast of the other poor creature, for she drew the girl close and wrapped her own scanty cloak about her; and Esther, perhaps comforted a little by this, fell into a doze. But in her fitful sleep she called so wildly on Percy, Percy Scott, her Percy, to come to her, that she awoke to be pushed roughly away by her companion.

“Percy Scott! What is Percy Scott to you, girl?” cried the woman. “Is he—is he—in Heaven’s name tell me he is not the one who wronged you?”

The girl’s silence answered her question forcibly enough.

“Him, too!” cried the woman, with bitter pain. “Then don’t curse him—curse me instead! What could the son of such a mother be?”

“His mother?”

“His mother, sure enough,” replied the wretched outcast; then with a touch of bravado she went on, “I’ve been both bonny and gay in my time, though I may look little like it now. And that’s a thing that runs in the blood—at least, so they say!”

Then she burst into one of her wild, dreadful laughs, which made Esther shrink away from her in horror.

When the grey dawn was slowly breaking, the regular porter came back to his post; and was shocked to find these two poor creatures lying at the gate. Esther was faint and powerless and stiff with the cold; the other woman had a flush on her cheek and an unnatural glitter in her

eyes which told of a very feverish condition both of mind and body.

After the man had seen them safely housed he came to his deputy, and gave him a piece of his mind.

"A nice mess you've made of this business!" he said grimly. "I wonder, however, I could expect a pauper like you to have feelings left same as other folks? A fine excuse you'll find the want of an order when it comes to a crowner's 'quest!'"

But the aged pauper who had acted as gatekeeper during the porter's absence knew the world. He winked knowingly with his wicked old bleared eyes.

"Crowner's 'quests? Who cares for crowner's 'quests?" he said coolly. "Everybody knows what they are worth, and what a long way a bit o' humbug 'll go with the jury. It stands to reason all

their feelin's are on t'other side! The thought o' th' poor-rates 'll save them bein' too hard on a chap when he's done nowt but his duty!"

## CHAPTER XI.

ALICK LISLE could treat no subject merely from a statistical standpoint. Even his latest one, that of "Pauperism," he wished and expected to render popular, by pieces of vivid description, and the individualizing of characteristic traits.

As a preliminary step, he was going through several of the workhouses both in London and the provinces ; taking the latter on his way to the metropolis.

Naturally, the first and nearest was that of Wrekenton, the large and busy manufacturing town of the county.

It was a raw day in the beginning of

November as he walked along the ugly, straight road leading from the town, and saw the big red building loom out from the fog. As he neared the gateway, he noticed a sad, feeble, pathetic figure leaning on a staff; and looking aimlessly around.

Alick at first thought he meant to beg, and scarcely took any notice, for beggars were so common and so vociferous there. But in a timid, hesitating voice the poor old man addressed him, and the voice was so weak that Alick could not make out his question.

"What is it you want to know?" said the young fellow carelessly.

"The poorhouse? Can ye tell me where th' poorhouse is?"

Then Alick looked at him, and saw at once that the first of his types—and perhaps the rarest—was before him. It was the respectable, honest, worn-out

labourer creeping unwillingly to his last earthly refuge.

Alick's heart ached for him ! Decent poverty has always a something infinitely more touching than the poverty which, with its parade of rags, seems to insist upon sympathy.

The old man was clean—spotlessly clean. His well saved suit was more than threadbare ; but it was brushed until not a speck of dust or mud soiled it, and the old checked handkerchief round his throat was spotless also.

But his face—that was where the pathos lay ! Bloodless and pallid, with the pallor of long months of semi-starvation ; it was set and stern with the resolve of the last terrible sacrifice of pride ; it was sad with despair unutterable. And yet the sadness had nothing emotional left in it.

That was all over and done with. He

was going to what meant living death for him, and he knew it ! His old life was left behind ; his dear old life, with its cares, sorrows, anxieties, privations ; its few joys ; but its lifelong habits and associations. He was too old for a new one now !

Alick did not ask his story ; there was no need. If even he had, it was very questionable whether he would have got it or no, for the old man's mind was preoccupied with its one great effort.

It was through no want of courtesy that he forgot to thank Alick for the information he asked. As little was it lack of sympathy on Alick's part that no word of kindness or pity could he utter.

Luckily the great ugly brick wall of the workhouse was close at hand, for the poor fellow could certainly not have gone much further. It seemed sad that there was no one left that cared sufficiently

about him to guide him even on this last walk of his. Would they have followed him to the grave, Alick wondered ?

He tottered feebly to the gate with scarce strength enough to knock at it left him. A hand and arm appeared in the opening, and closed the door after him. Another inmate for the ugly red-brick house. Well, well ; it could not be for long !

Alick waited and walked about for a while, before he followed the old man. Then he introduced himself to the master, and was shown through the place by the matron. But there was little to be learnt from the perfunctory way in which she took him along the big whitewashed wards, and cleanly, well-kept corridors. Very little information could he gain from her as to the cause which brought the inmates there, or their feelings when in the place.

Old women, in clean caps and blue print gowns, were seated sewing; others, similarly attired, were busy in laundry and kitchen; while some tiny children—happily unconscious as yet of anything unusual in their lot—smiled up at Alick as he passed.

Making these last happy with a gift of sweetmeats, and thanking the matron for her courtesy, he turned away disappointed. This was the sort of thing he had seen before, the ratepayers' poor-house. What he wanted to get at was something so different!

Passing out, he encountered again the poor old man he had seen at the entrance, and who now was being passed on by the gatekeeper.

A momentary glance at the shrewd face of the official, and Alick spoke.

“ Poor old fellow, he seems sadly broken down ! ”

"Ay, ay, he's that, sir. Eighty. Day-labourer. Family all dead. Says he's glad o' that, too, 'cause we'd ha' had to part him from his old woman! Never was in before, nor none of his kin, he says. Lord, we haven't many o' that class here!"

"What brings them for the most part?" asked Alick, with interest.

"Why, ten out of twelve comes in *drunk!* That answers ye pretty fairly, doesn't it? Feel their position?" he went on, repeating Alick's question as an ejaculation. "I only wish they did, sir! Why, the most of them think they have a right to the place, and quite look down on me as a new comer. 'My feyther died here, and his feyther afore him, and, for all I can tell, his feyther afore that!' They will often say this with quite an air of pride in the pedigree. Folks that write sentimental rubbish about our

inmates know precious little about them, I reckon. Not that I'm denying there *are* exceptions ; but they are few and far between, they are indeed, sir ! Maybe ye would like a bit look through my department ? " he asked ; and Alick assented gladly.

The gatekeeper led the way first into a long upper room, where the clothes the paupers had on when they came were kept for them. Many a tragic story seemed to Alick to lie amongst these. The tragedy, however, relieved by a touch of humour ; as the man pointed to a bundle of stout cudgels, which were prudentially taken from the men on entering, lest they should come to blows.

" Those are lots that'll never be claimed now—owners all died here," explained the official ; pointing to an appallingly long row of bundles—bundles of all sizes

and shapes. Then, ere Alick had a moment's time to muse on the poor lives which had left no other biography than that brief epitaph, and no monument save a dingy bundle on a workhouse shelf; his companion directed his attention to another part of the ward. There lay a smart velvet hat, with a long, soiled white plume.

“This is a sort of thing we often have,” remarked the porter, with a smile, where cynicism and pity warred for mastery.

Talk about the philosophy of clothes!

No Teufelsdroch ever discoursed with more telling eloquence than did that hat as the gatekeeper whirled it round on his hand. The story it told of a *life* made the pathos of the records of death grow paler.

No need to ask what it meant! The white plume had only the memory of

purity left it—chance if the soul of its owner had even so much.

The two men were silent for a moment or two as they looked at it; and then, with a sigh, the official put it back in its place. Not a heavy sigh, of course ; he was too used to such things. Perhaps it was only Alick's strong feeling which communicated itself to one, who was as yet only inured to such sights, not coarsened by them.

“ There's lots such as that come here to die, poor souls ! Will you go through that part too—or have you had enough ? ”

“ I should like it much, if it's not taking up too much of your time,” replied Alick ; and they went on into a dreary ward occupied by outcast women.

“ Ay, ay, that's Lizzie again ! ” muttered the porter, as they passed a bed where a mass of fair, tangled hair lay loose on the pillow.

" You know her, then ? " asked Alick, vexed at himself because the colour of the hair had recalled Nelly's, and it was profanation even to think of her amid such surroundings.

" Know her ? I should think so, indeed ! She was brought up here, but always was a bit weak-minded. Age nineteen—three children—all dead."

The gatekeeper was only quoting the entry made in his book against her name ; but Alick, with a literary instinct, was caught by the man's laconic yet suggestive epitome.

A little further on, a nurse, rough but not unkindly, was standing by a bed where lay a woman. A woman, or a woman's body ? Alick scarce knew which, when his eye fell upon the white, set face. Something in the face, some strange, undefinable familiarity arrested his attention, and ere he could withdraw

his gaze, a pair of large dark eyes opened, and met his own with the frenzied, futile appeal of one in utter agony.

No need to ask its cause. As he looked at the parched, discoloured lips, and the damp locks of grey hair which fell over the brow, he saw that the woman was dying, and that she knew it.

A thing happening every moment, and yet none the less terrible to witness for that!

It seemed brutal to stand and watch such a scene, so Alick turned away, and the two men stepped softly back along the ward.

Strong as Alick was, and physically not a bit of a coward, he felt for the moment sick and faint. He had grown painfully sensitive of late, and the sight of suffering in whatever form almost unmanned him. It brought back too pain-

fully the burden of the sorrow of the world. Oh, to get leave, for just one day even, to forget the pain of living, and the hopelessness of dying.

## CHAPTER XII.

JUST as he was leaving the ward, some one came running up to him, and touched him on the arm.

“Please, sir, the woman in Number Twenty-four wants to speak to you,” this person said, in an appealing tone. It was the nurse he had just noticed by the side of the dying woman. “I don’t know what she wants, but we don’t like to cross them when they’re as near their ends as that ! ”

“I fancy she must have taken you for a clergyman,” put in the gatekeeper. “We haven’t many visitors in this part, save one of them now and then.”

Alick started at this, and looked rather annoyed. To take him for a parson—him, of all men !

“Anybody that was in their right senses wouldn’t make such a mistake,” went on the man, seeing that the visitor did not like the suggestion ; “but maybe you could do what she wants almost as well. If you could only speak a word of comfort to the poor soul ; or if it isn’t making too bold, ye might go over a prayer with her.”

The idea was monstrous ! He, Alick Lisle, the declared atheist, who for months, if not years, had never consciously uttered word of appeal to any higher power—if such there be—he, to be asked to comfort and pray with a dying woman ! Surely fate was too cruel —mocking him, mocking even his soul’s bitter thirst !

"If there were but anything to pray to," he thought, with agonized longing.

Nevertheless, his answer sounded like a sneer.

"What good would it do her if I could?"

The gatekeeper shook his head dubiously.

"It mostly makes them die easier! Though I cannot but say that such as her, if they live, don't often keep straight long, however penitent they may seem for a bit. But ye'll surely not refuse to see what she wants? She may have something on her mind."

Alick turned back with the nurse; but the latter was speedily dismissed by her patient.

"Leave us alone, nurse," was somehow spoken in the tone of one accustomed to command.

Even lying on a death-bed in a poor-

house, that strange power of gentle birth made itself felt, and the nurse instinctively obeyed at once.

“Come nearer to me and let me look in your face,” said the sick woman next; and Alick bent his healthy, handsome face a little down towards her. Yet even as he did so, he felt a shrinking, of which he was half ashamed, from the woman who was a sinner.

He told himself he pitied her; said she was only another victim ground under the cruel car of civilization; and asked, as he had done a thousand times before—what he meant by sin? Was it merely the old theological figment still clinging to him of an offence against the laws of the Ruler of the world; or did he mean something opposed to the interests of the majority? But then again—who could prove, for the satisfaction of this said majority, that all vice was so opposed?

Once dismiss the idea of a future life and a Higher Power, and was there any very strong argument even against such a life as this before him ?

He had studied the old problems so often that they followed each other now mechanically ; and his tired brain repeated them without conscious volition on his part ; even when, as now, his whole mind was absorbed in some other interest. And when his brain persisted in working in this automatic fashion, what appalling conclusions it arrived at.

Conclusions at which the man's moral nature stood aghast, and against which his as yet unperverted will fought savagely.

Meanwhile the dying woman looked searchingly at him—appealingly he felt—and for the life of him could he find one word to say to her. Oh, for some hope, some glimpse of future comfort, to

hold out to this wretched creature before him !

“ Tell me what you wish to say,” he managed to get out at last. “ I will do anything I can for you ! ”

The parched lips moved convulsively, but not a sound came from them. It was too evident that what she had to say was painful in the extreme.

“ Trust me,” murmured Alick. “ Is it any of your friends you want sent for ? ”

With a terrible effort the woman raised herself on one arm, gave a sort of ghastly laugh.

“ Friends ? *my* friends ? Don’t you know—women like—me—have no friends ? Lovers maybe, while our youth and good looks last—friends never ! ”

Then she sank back. Still she hesitated to speak definitely to Alick. Yes, she was sure it was the same young fellow she had seen with Nelly—Nelly, the baby

she had deserted. She had recognized the face, the voice ; and with the desperate instinctive clinging of one passing out into the unknown, she caught at this one link with the life so soon to be over. Yet now he had come to her she knew not what to say. A thousand fears and a thousand memories were awakened by his presence.

The woman had left husband and children years ago ; left honour, faith, and purity behind her, and since that had gone down to the lowest depths of pollution ; but there was still one germ of good in her, in that passionate love to her children. Even yet it seemed to her that she could feel at times the touch of baby hands, and the clinging warmth of a child at her bosom.

“ I saw you once with her—my Nelly,” she burst out with at last, sobs and hysterical cries almost choking her utter-

ance. “I oughtn’t to tell, I know that, and I meant to—to die without a sign; but it’s no use, I cannot do it! Don’t let her know where and how her —her mother—died—but tell her my last thought was of her. Oh, my darlings, my darlings, how had I the heart to leave you? ”

It needed scarcely a moment for Alick to grasp the meaning of these wild words.

Horrible revelation! This then was Mr. Scott’s runaway wife—even in his thoughts he would not call her Nelly’s mother! The pity he had felt for the *unknown* woman died now that he knew her history, and in its stead came a fierce indignation.

It was bad enough of any mother to forsake her children—but when one of those children was Nelly!

The woman’s quick eye saw the repulsion he felt, but she did not resent it

in the least. She was, indeed, too much accustomed to it to do that.

But all at once a fear came to her. What if he should despise Nelly for her mother's sin.

"I ought to have died quiet," she said again, moving her head restlessly on the pillow, and plucking at the counterpane in the way too well known by all nurses. "But surely you won't punish her, my Nelly, for her mother's sin?" and the poor creature looked pitifully up at the young man's stern face.

Alick softened a little at the look. What an end to come to, he thought; as he glanced at the squalid quilt, the coarse sheets and pillows; and remembered the stories he had heard of the luxurious, fastidious ways of the city bride Mr. Scott had brought with such pride among the hard-working, thrifty Northumbrian women.

"I love Nelly," he said, softly.  
"Nothing shall ever come between us."

After this she was quiet for a minute or two, and then she seemed to fall into a kind of sleep.

Alick knew he could do no good there, and yet he lingered. He felt as though he could not leave Nelly's mother to die alone, or with only strangers near her; and so he sat down by the bedside; a solitary watcher, save for the nurse, who made occasional visits to look at her patient.

There was nothing to be done. The woman dosed, or, at least, was unconscious of what went on around. She had forgotten his presence, and save for her moans or broken sentences, the utmost stillness reigned in the room.

Alick Lisle never forgot the weary, anxious watch by the death-bed of that poor stricken, sinful creature. The bare,

melancholy ward ; the long row of empty beds, and at the far end the girl “ Lizzie,” sleeping off the effects of her drinking bout. A text or two on the whitewashed walls, supplied by some charitable person for the edification of the sick. One just opposite, stared at him in red and blue letters on a gold ground, “ Go, and sin no more.”

He wondered if the woman had noticed it ; wondered if it had recalled the exquisite story he wished he could believe in, and which held out so much hope for such as she ?

Surely she must have done so, for among the words which fell from her dry lips, these reached his ear.

“ And He said, ‘ Hath no man condemned thee ? ’ and she answered and said, ‘ All men, Lord ! ’ ”

Then a moment’s silence, and she went on again—

“ No room here for me since that—the shame left no room even for repentance ! Will Death mend things, and set us straight again—will it, eh ? ” and the voice rose to a shriek. “ Death ! That’s nothing, is it ? Some of us here are so wretched we think nothing of that—that leap into the dark ! But it’s after—after—that’s what keeps us clinging on here—ah—after. They say He is merciful—merciful ! While they make Him out harder than we are to ourselves—and Heaven knows how hard that is sometimes ! But to think—to think of that awful white throne where we will have to stand ; and—and to think that all one’s old half-forgotten sins will be raked up there—and the eyes we still love will see them written—written in our faces ; or their ears hear us confess them—is that not cruel, think you ? ”

Alick moistened the woman’s lips, and

wiped the dew from her brow as she sank back exhausted. But she could not rest.

“What were you reading me, nurse?” she cried, oblivious of the fact that the nurse was at the far end of the ward. “It comes back and back—if I only dare believe it. About Him who wipes away all tears—surely that ought to give even the worst sinner hope; but me—no, no; I was too bad! You might have helped me back to something better, John Scott—though you wouldn’t believe it at the time. Tell him that;” and suddenly the woman gripped Alick’s wrist, and turned her fast glazing eyes upon him. “No, no, don’t. I’m a wicked one to the last, you see—not that I’d spare him, but for them that I love still! There’s one thing you might do, though,” she said, starting up in bed, and gathering her fast ebbing strength together for a last effort; “that’s

what I wanted to tell you, but couldn't get it out at first. My sin has been repeated—been repeated in my boy."

And then, with many pauses and gasps for breath, the woman told of the discovery she had made on the night of her arrival at the workhouse ; and made Alick promise to seek out and succour the girl her son had betrayed.

" She's a good girl, I'm sure of that—however she may have been led away—not a light-headed one like—like I was. Tell *him* of my end, if you like—tell him his mother nearly cursed him—nearly cursed him ! "

Then the poor creature sank back, overcome with weakness, and the emotions which had rent her in her last moments. A film crept over her eyes, and her breath came pantingly, rather than in regular respirations ; then there was an interval of perfect stillness, and,

save for the restless life still lingering in the thin hands, Alick would have fancied she was dead.

The doctor came up to the bedside, and shook his head as he looked at her.

“ Soon be over now,” he murmured, softly; “ she’s been a fine, strong woman once; died very hard.”

Alick would have given all he had to have rushed from the place. It was not that he feared the sight of death merely—but such a death—and for Nelly’s mother! Luckily, however, for his feelings after, he had sufficient self-restraint to sit quietly, and to outward appearance calmly, until it was all over.

Suddenly she gave a wild cry, which echoed through the empty room.

“ God, pity, forgive,” she gasped; and then her breath ceased with a struggle, and the poor, racked, weary body was at rest.

As Alick walked to the inn where he was staying, he could not get the scene out of his mind. Did death end all; and if not, what came after?

## CHAPTER XIII.

It is painful enough in all conscience to recognize our mistakes by failure, but this pain is as nothing to that of one who does so in the moment of his success.

To struggle nobly, to sacrifice heroically, to aspire, and at last to attain, only to find that the object is valueless, the battle not worth the winning—this is agony indeed !

And such was Alick Lisle's experience, poor fellow !

Fresh from that ghastly scene at the workhouse, he came back to his room in the hotel he was staying at, to find the

table strewn with newspapers, reviews, and letters.

Mechanically he opened them, his mind too full of death's dark mystery to feel much interest in anything else. In this mood the first he took up seemed to mock him. It was an enthusiastically laudatory review of his new book.

In it he was hailed as the champion of freedom, the herald of advancing thought, the Wilberforce of enslaved souls bound by the unnatural restraints of religious tyranny.

"A few such books as this, and men would rouse themselves, and shaking off superstitious fancies and terrors, learn at length that happiness is the ultimate good, and that the increase of it is the only thing worth striving for. This great truth once grasped by common sense, it would necessarily follow that false restraints on personal freedom,

narrow doctrines of morality, and false ideas of the marriage tie would all vanish in the increasing light of knowledge ; and the bondage so long imposed on Humanity by a rapacious and tyrannical Church, would be finally broken and trampled under the feet of the advancing millions of daring thinkers.”

So it went on for a page and a half in the same strain ; and Alick threw down the paper in disgust.

Was this the end of his year of hard work and careful study ?

He had honestly rebelled against injustice and seeming cruelty ; had disbelieved in a God ; but had fallen back on an ideal good—on the laws of right and wrong which he imagined self-existent, and which he fondly fancied would lead men to a higher goal, when their souls were no longer bowed at the altar to a Power who was absolutely

beneath their own moral standard. And at the very outset his disciples cited his teaching in excuse for vices and weaknesses which he loathed.

He—Nelly's lover—he, whose greatest hope was to win a pure and innocent girl to be his wife—to be held up as the champion of such pseudo-freedom ; he, to lessen for a moment the sanctity of marriage ! Ah, he knew too well and grieved too heartily over the laxity of the views held on that subject already !

In that moment of bitter pain there came a revelation to him. He seemed to see prophetically what the views he was preaching would do for humanity.

True, he had written of laws which, once broken, knew no mercy, and on which the pining cry of the disobedient would have no effect ; had written in glowing terms on the healthful beauty of virtue and the glory of living—not for the

selfish reward of a heaven hereafter—but to help on that golden age of humanity, when right should be loved for its own sake; without either a God to smile on the good or frown on the evil.

And yet all the time, perhaps, he had been only robbing miserable, tempted souls of all that made life liveable, and goodness possible.

He had thought of Christianity as mere priestcraft. Never until then had he grasped what it really might mean to a sinful human soul in the hour of its desperate need.

“It mostly makes them die easier!”

The words haunted him.

What right had he to rob men and women of even that anaesthetic?

It might matter little to him, a young, strong, matter-of-fact man, to be shut up in a darkened solitude. But what of the weak and the nervous, the sick and the

dying? Why had he tried to keep *them* from believing in the gleams of light which they fancied shone in upon them, and the echoes of a loving voice they seemed to hear from the other world?

It was his perverted sympathy with suffering which had driven Alick to atheism; it was a deeper and more sympathetic insight into that suffering which now served to render him dissatisfied with it.

He paced his room in the deepening twilight; fighting with himself, and agonized by the fear which was being borne in upon him, that his book—whether true or false—might be a curse instead of a blessing to his race.

And yet, truth *was* truth; and a man could not do better than bear witness to what he saw of it!

Twilight had grown into night, and darkness filled the room, save for the

faint glimmer of a gas-lamp from the street.

Alick went to the window, and throwing it open, leaned out. The sky was clear and starlit, and a faint touch of frost sharpened the air. The cool breeze blew refreshingly on Alick's temples, as his eyes sought the street. Busy crowds were hurrying along—who could tell where?

Much as he had lived in towns of late, the intense sympathy of the country-bred man never allowed him to view a crowd with indifference. He could scarce ever see a human creature without wishing to know its history, nor a crowd without thinking of it individually.

And yet—surely he had never seen below the surface as he did at this moment?

Face after face seemed full of little else but sorrow and sin as they passed between

himself and the light. Children prematurely old, men brutal or abject, women bold and sensual, or crushed and care-worn—all hurrying on to the unknown. What comfort for such as these in his fine creed of the progress of mankind, in the glorious heritage to be stored up for posterity?

Think of preaching *that* as a lever to yonder intoxicated brute, who clenches his fist in the face of the wretched woman clinging appealingly to him; as he turns to enter the glaring, gaudy spirit bar opposite. Listen to his loud and bullying tone as he replies to her gentle pleadings.

“Be off with ye,” he cries, savagely; “haven’t I telled ye times without number ye’re never to follow me more?” Then, pointing contemptuously at the squalid, dejected creature, whose ragged dress and shawl must have been a poor protection against the cold, he turned to

his companions. "As if a chap—a decent chap"—hiccough—"like me wanted to go"—hiccough—"go about, I say, with a—a objeck like that at his heels?"

His injured tone was quite a curiosity in its way.

"And is it my fault, if I'm a disgrace to be seen?" wailed the woman, peevishly; "I was a smart enough lass in my day, anybody can tell you that—afore I had the ill-luck to set eyes on you! And who has kept ye all these years with the work of her hands, ye great, useless, drunken brute you?" she went on, exasperated out of all patience with the drunken contempt showered on her. "One would think the least a man could do would be to work for hisself—much less his lawful, wedded wife?"

"Wife?" repeated the sot, taking the pipe out of his mouth, and waving it in an oratorical manner. "And what's the

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good o' all our"—hiccough—"lightenment—all our larnin', if we're to stick to such outworn fancies as that? Bless my shoul,"—hiccough—"why should we have to keep a—a woman when we're tired on her? I—I shay, we'll ha' no wives—we'll ha' no wives, I shay—be rid o' them all together. Look here, now," he continued, to the intense amusement of the bystanders, trying to simulate the impressive manner of the secularist lecturer he had heard recently, "we're goin' to be bound no longer by the fettersh, the fettersh, I shay, of con-ven-sh-ualty. The age of freedom is advanshin', and we'll be Church-ridden, priest-ridden, wife-ridden no longer. And a man'll have leave to shpend his"—hiccough—"evenin's in the—the intelleckshual shociety, where he's bound to be a shinin' and a brilliant light! "

And with a parting shove to his wife,

this disciple of modern thought staggered into the public-house, followed by a laughing crowd of companions.

What a comment on Alick's thoughts this was !

After all, did he really believe that humanity ever would improve ? Was it capable of it ? Did not the individual ever grow further from innocence as the years rolled on ? Then, why should not the same rule apply to the race ?

Alick shut the window hastily. The life without was sickening !

If he could but believe there was a God who cared ; or, failing that, a devil who influenced. To blame something outside of humanity for humanity's hopeless sin would be such an exquisite relief !

## CHAPTER XIV.

PRISON life was harder on Dick Hepple than it could well have been on any other man of his class. Living almost entirely out of doors, he felt stifled—spite of all modern efforts at ventilation—and longed with a passionate yearning for the pure air of the hills, or the coolness of the green woods.

He had been fond of solitude, or solitude broken only by the timid wild creatures of the forest; and here he could not be alone.

He had hated regularity; and now the monotonous punctuality of the hours almost maddened him.

Then the man—notwithstanding his

lack of conscience in the matter of stray hares or rabbits—was essentially honest ; and the society of thieves was abhorrent to him.

Above everything, with all his roughness and outward coarseness, his heart was pure ; and his love for Esther had been elevated and chivalrous as that of any knight of romance ; and here love was never mentioned without a coarse jest ; and woman seemed but another name for all that was low and contemptible in the mouths of the men around him.

He grew sullen and morose, and his easy going good nature appeared to turn to malice. Every man's hand was against him—his hand for the future should be against the world !

He had plenty of friends outside the gaol, but none the thought of whose affection towards him, could keep his heart soft—and the one woman he loved

would never trouble her mind about him, after perhaps a momentary pity, and a careless ejaculation of "Poor Dick!" And yet there was nothing that concerned him more than the thought that he might have fallen in her estimation by the trouble that had come upon him, and the shame he would feel in ever meeting her eyes after he was free. She had told him to take care of himself, too, and that it would vex her if anything happened to him. God bless her for the kindly speech, though it wasn't likely she'd feel much for a chap like him !

Alick Lisle did not forget his promised visit ; and while in Wrekenton took the chance of running over to Morbury gaol ; but though he had made inquiries and learnt all there was to know about Esther, he tried to keep the knowledge of her misery from Dick, wishing to spare the poor fellow what pain he could.

But it was difficult without absolute untruthfulness to parry the directness of Dick's questions; especially at a time when his own mind was so unsettled, and his hesitation and silence roused suspicion.

"Mr. Lisle, you're keepin' something from me; for Heaven's sake tell me the truth! It's hard for a man to be shut up here, without a chance of knowin' what's happening in the meantime!"

But Alick still shrank from telling him. Bad as suspense was, surely the truth would be worse.

"She's not dead? Oh, tell me she is not dead," the poor fellow sobbed brokenly; his passionate outcry suddenly subsiding, as that awful possibility dawned on him.

"No, no, Dick, she's living! I can swear to that," answered Alick, heartily.

He was so thankful for the ability to

answer one question directly, that he forgot he was only paving the way for more.

A moment's pause; then Dick sprang to his feet.

"What is wrong, then? As you are an honest man, tell me true. Has that smooth-tongued villain played her false, that you can't be straightforward about her always as you were just now?"

"May God's curse light on him!" cried Dick, as Alick's silence answered only too well.

What could Alick say to this man, infuriated by righteous indignation? As yet he had not seen Percy—did not know how the young fellow would act; and though he tried to soothe Dick with hopes that Percy would marry the girl, he had little belief in his own words.

Alick did, however, succeed in keeping from Dick the knowledge of all Esther

had undergone; and when he left the gaol, the latter was still ignorant that she had left her home; and ignorant, too, that Percy was not still at the farm with his father.

Left alone Dick sat gloomily, his head on his hands. He was thinking.

Caged as he was, what *could* he do?

Nothing, nothing—and yet the girl had none to fight for her; and Esther, the proud woman he had so worshipped, how would she bear the bitter shame that would fall on her? Her old father was hard and selfish; she would get little help or comfort from him!

Dick's thoughts travelled back to the last time he had seen her, and back to the night when he saw her with her lover in the old mill. He started, for a thought had come to him now. The cigar-case!

Send that to old Scott, and tell the tale

of where and when he found it. Mr. Scott—hard and stern as he was—would not refuse to listen, and he was a just man ; he would surely see that his son did the right thing by an innocent girl ?

“ Oh, God ! ” cried the poor fellow, for suddenly he remembered this was out of his power.

True, he had kept the case, and carried it always about him, with some instinctive feeling that the time might come when he would want it—but the case lay with his few other possessions in the pocket of his own old velveteen coat ; the coat he had laid aside when he had been forced to don his prison dress.

One thing was still possible ; he would write and tell his tale, and trust it to carry conviction ; though the proof he had been building on was not attainable.

And yet even that was difficult ! How could he show such a letter to any one ;

and if he did not consent to do so, how could he manage to write and despatch it without leave ?

Poor Dick was cunning enough when it was a question of trapping or snaring the lower animals ; but when he had to pit his powers against the strict supervision of prison discipline, he felt utterly at a loss.

Another fortnight and he would be free, and might go to Mr. Scott in person and say his say ; but what might not happen in a fortnight to the poor girl, should her stern old father meanwhile have his suspicions roused, and if that scoundrel was not made to do his duty ?

Write he must ; but how ? Suddenly his eye fell on a tiny piece of pencil, which by some inadvertence Alick had pulled out of his pocket, and not observed when it fell. Dick succeeded in picking it up unseen.

So much was accomplished, and the way of getting the letter conveyed out of gaol was not difficult; for one or two old friends still looked him up, and were only too glad “to help a pal in trouble.”

As to giving them the letter, that could easily be managed; for they were “knowing ones,” though they had never as yet got into trouble with the law; and the slightest hint from him would be enough. Then, too, the warder had somewhat relaxed his care in watching Dick; knowing his sentence had nearly expired, and never having caught him in any breach of prison regulations hitherto.

The one hindrance was the lack of paper; and Dick’s eyes surveyed the dreary cell hopelessly, till they rested on a Bible, and then it struck him that the fly leaf would answer his purpose. Discovery was pretty certain, perhaps,

afterwards ; but punishment cells, or even severer hardships seemed a small matter compared to letting the record of Esther's shame go before the prison authorities.

## CHAPTER XV.

MR. SCOTT, after a brief visit to the Wrekenton workhouse, had returned home more morose and unneighbourly than ever.

He sat gloomily smoking, or wandered listlessly through his fields, shunning the high-road, and turning off abruptly from a footpath if he caught sight of any one's approach; yet he himself could not have explained his own state of mind. His wretched wife was dead—he had made sure of that; and after all, the misery and the dread suspense as to what further disgrace she might bring on herself and him, perhaps there was almost relief in the thought that the worst had come;

As for his painful story being talked of in the neighbourhood, it was unpleasant; but then he perfectly well knew that every inhabitant of it had been thoroughly acquainted with the main facts of the ugly history for years past; and yet he knew that he was suffering more keenly than he had done for long.

Could it be that the sight of the face once so dear to him, which in death had regained some trace of its old beauty, had revived the recollection of her bloom and her freshness when he brought his bride from the gay life of town to brighten and refine the dull farm-house? Or, was it rather that the bitter message (which Alick reluctantly repeated to him, when he had insisted on hearing all there was to be told, and most of all if she had left any word for himself) had awakened within him some feelings of remorse?

Could it be that he who all those years

had thought of himself as entirely the sufferer, and the injured ; could it be that he had been too hard, made too little allowance for a nature different from his own ; a nature that could not be contented without luxury, and pleasure, and change ?

And yet, would it have made any difference ? He doubted it ! But one thing he did wish, and that was that he had tried to do something for her before it was too late.

He could not, for his children's sake, have taken her back to his home ; but still he might have provided for her in some way, and then perhaps they need never have known the disgrace their mother had brought on them !

He had noticed the red eyes of his innocent Nelly since she had known the truth ; and Percy—his proud Percy—would perhaps feel it even more.

And he was a good lad, was Percy, spite of all his foppish foibles. Hadn't he given up that girl o' Grey's, though he was very near in love with her, just to please his old father? Well, well, he should find the old man would not forget it, and he should have more of his own way when he came home again, and many a little indulgence he'd been denied before. And Mr. Scott even glanced over the fence at a bay filly Jim Dobson was breaking for Farmer Harrison, with a view to purchase, before the time his son should leave college.

Seeing the figure of the postboy coming along at the same moment, the farmer stopped till he came up, and the little fellow was glad to put into his hands the one letter addressed to himself, and thereby shorten his own long round of walking.

"The handwriting is a queer one, at

any rate," grunted Mr. Scott to himself, as he glanced at the envelope before tearing it open.

But, good heavens! who could be writing to him from Morbury prison?

Dick Hepple! What could the fellow mean by writing to him?

Ill-used, of course, he had been, but that could not be helped now. Anyway, he supposed he must see what it was all about; and he'd need his spectacles to do that, for such writing he could not make out without their help.

And Mr. Scott turned towards the house to read the letter at his leisure.

## CHAPTER XVI.

In response to a brief telegram from Alick, it was not long before Percy made his appearance at the former's lodgings ; and the poor fellow's anxiety and sorrow drew Alick to him ; spite of all the blame he could not free him from, and spite, too, of the half-contemptuous feeling with which he had always till now regarded the lad. Percy was excited, overstrained ; the knowledge of his mother's shame and death had come on him so suddenly, and being followed almost instantly by the news of Esther and her child, he was overwhelmed ; and clung to Alick as to the one steadfast support within his reach.

His pride was broken ; and he listened patiently, submissively, to Alick's words, however severe they were. He was just in the mood to be impressed and influenced by the other's stronger nature and inflexible code of duty.

He had always flattered himself on his tender, sensitive nature ; but now his stern monitor made him feel that his tenderness had been a mere luxurious shrinking from the sight of suffering, while he had not hesitated to inflict it ; that the sensitiveness had been merely a shirking of the rugged pieces of life's pathway, while he had left a fragile woman to tread them unaided.

The revelation was terrible, but salutary ; and now the lad's emotional temperament was roused on the higher side ; and passionately he begged to be told what he could do to remedy the evil he had wrought.

" He had never thought, never dreamed of grief like this for dear, gentle Esther, whose great sin had been loving and trusting him too much ; but he would do his duty like a man at last ! How he would pet the poor thing after all she had gone through ; and he would marry her, and never heed what the world might say ; and she should never think he despised her for the shame he had brought on her ; though, of course, he knew that she would worship him for his goodness in all the years to come.

Yes, he meant to be very good to Esther now ; and his eyes brightened with excitement, perhaps also with admiration, of his own heroism ; and still there was something nobler in it than that ; there was at least the dawn, though faint as yet, of a true man's chivalrous wish to protect and cherish the woman who loves him.

Alick had not yet fulfilled his promise to Mrs. Scott to his own satisfaction.

He had delayed even trying to see Esther, until he could bring Percy to recognize his duty ; when, in seeing her himself, he could prepare the girl for that interview with her lover, which he knew must be such a trial to both.

Now, however, he had nerved himself for a task necessarily a painful one ; and left Percy alone meanwhile.

The couple of hours it must be before Alick could return, seemed almost unbearable to Percy as he looked forward.

He grew nervous and restless, and paced the floor excitedly.

Was there nothing he could do ? Nothing but wait ? Yes, surely there was one thing ; and the very unpleasantness of it gave it attraction to the lad in his new mood.

He had fallen so low in his own esti-

mation,' he must needs do something to prove to himself that he was not the utterly heartless coward that he had appeared.

And now that he had so thoroughly resolved to marry Esther, the least he could do was to write to his father without delay.

After all, his father would acknowledge the resolution was right; however angry he might be at the sin of the past.

It would be a relief, at all events, to remove his resolve from the debatable stage, and put it beyond the power of recall.

Finding writing materials at hand on Alick's table, he sat down at once.

The first line or two he found difficult; but his excitement carried him on after that, and he wrote page after page, scarcely knowing what he wrote; but pouring out all the story of his temptation, his penitence, and his resolve.

The letter was written and despatched before Alick returned ; and he found the lad gazing eagerly from the window—every line of his face strained and earnest looking—while now, that Alick had gained the room, his white lips could form no question, yearning though he was to learn all the other had to tell.

“ You’ll have no need to be ashamed of her, Percy ; she’s a noble girl ! ” were the first words Alick uttered. His feelings towards Esther had undergone a change since he had seen her.

He had met fallen women before ; and in truth, though he had pitied them, usually he had felt his sympathy and interest very little roused. Notwithstanding Dick’s laudatory account of Esther, and Percy’s love to her, he had urged the latter to marry her, with the feeling that, having ruined an outwardly innocent girl, there was no shirking the

duty, though the said duty was a very hard one.

He had gone to see her, too, expecting at best a sentimental, maudlin girl, weeping over the hardness of a fate she had brought on herself; and the young fellow had shrunk from the meeting.

If he had been one of the religious sort it would have been comparatively easy, he thought; then he could have soothed her after the fashion he had heard so often; and never without his gorge rising at the sickly, maundering piety which seemed to hold out a premium to sin, as it talked of Magdalenes and Marys who surpassed in loving devotion all the useful, honest Marthas in the world.

He knew such talkers travestied even the records from which they professed to draw their lessons; but to Alick, in his youthful hardness, it looked as easy to restore the purity of the down-trodden

snow of the city street, as to restore the soul of a woman that had lost its first whiteness.

To his astonishment, Esther had met him calmly, and maintained her composure throughout. Her sorrow was too deep, too much a part of herself, to find relief in words, or to seek a stranger's sympathy ; and though the young man wondered at her quiet strength, he instinctively felt that it was the result of excess of feeling, not the lack of it.

" She will see me—at once—where ? " burst out Percy, excitedly. All the passionate love of old in some way taking fresh fire at Alick's words.

He was weak, this lad—he could not, perhaps help it—he felt his resolution less heroic, his duty less hard, because one man acknowledged Esther still worthy of respect.

And as Alick spoke in a quiet, and yet

not unmoved tone of the girl, her evident sorrow, and the traces of past agony all too visible still—Percy only wondered how he had ever hesitated, or ever counted it a sacrifice.

Alick, fancying it would spare the girl pain, had tried to induce her to meet Percy at the house where he himself was staying ; or, indeed, anywhere rather than in the workhouse ward ; but this she would not hear of.

Her pride was morbid now, and showed itself in odd ways.

All that Alick could do he had done, viz., to arrange that the interview should be a private one ; and in a very little time Percy was eagerly making his way to meet the girl he had wronged so deeply, and yet loved so passionately.

What fancies filled his mind as he went ; how he would comfort her in her grief ; how he would press on her lips the

kiss that should cancel the past, and give promise for the future ; and how, after that brief reconciliation, she would put her white arms round his neck, and weep away on his breast almost the very memory of her shame.

## CHAPTER XVII.

“ TAKE the bairn wi’ thee, take the bairn,” said a rough-spoken, but kindly nurse to Esther ; as she stood pale and trembling at the summons which had come to her. “ It often melts their hearts a bit, if they’ve got any o’ the right stuff in them ; and yours must hae that, anyway, or he wouldn’t ha’ come after ye here ! ”

But Esther gave a glance at the sleeping babe, and shook her head sadly. Then she went out to meet her lover, the man who had wronged her, and then left her to bear her sorrow and shame alone.

Yet in her heart was no bitterness towards him ; nothing but a calm dead

feeling, where once had throbbed such passionate love.

As she entered the little room where Percy waited for her alone, he gave a cry of pity and remorse; and throwing his arms round her, kissed her ardently before she could prevent him.

“Oh, Esther, my Esther, why didn’t you let me know?” he said, half savagely. “Could you not trust me better than that?”

“My poor, poor darling, how you must have suffered!” he went on in a tenderer manner, the great tears starting to his eyes as he looked at her.

Esther had drawn herself away from his embrace, steadily and coldly, and now stood quietly before him, resting her hand on the table for support.

She was still weak and fragile, from the attack of brain-fever which had followed on her confinement.

Her beautiful dark hair had all been cut off close to her head, and the pure oval face was thin and sunken with great dark circles under the eyes ; and yet as she stood there, white and worn, Percy knew that never till that moment had he recognized the exquisite finish of her loveliness.

Motherhood—albeit shamed and dishonoured—had given an earnestness and steadfastness to the face and figure which showed what the full completion of its womanly beauty and dignity might be ; or might have been rather, had it not been marred and crushed with its weight of shame and sorrow.

“ Have you not a word for me, Esther ? ” pleaded the young man, earnestly. “ Good God, do you think I have no feeling, that you stand there so calm and composed, while I—I thought I would have gone mad when I heard it first ? ”

Esther's lips trembled at the sound of the pained, almost agonized voice.

"What would you have me say, Percy?" she asked, wearily.

"Say anything—reproach me, threaten me, curse me if you like, only don't look as if you were made of stone."

"I am, I think," answered the girl, putting her hand to her head, and sighing.

"Will you let me try to—to undo the wrong?" asked Percy hesitatingly.

Then Esther seemed to rouse herself.

"The sin belongs to the past, Percy! We cannot undo it—never, never, though one were willing to die for it. But the shame is with us still, the shame and the remorse."

"But if you would marry me now people would soon forget; we would live it down before long. Esther, I mean it. I do in truth! I never loved you half as much as now, and I would give up all

for you. Nay, dearest, do not turn from me with that cold, proud look, as though you did not believe me. I'm not so bad as you think me, for I have done something. I've braved the old man's wrath at last, and told him I meant to marry you if you would have me."

"You told him—*that?* " asked the girl slowly, lifting her steadfast eyes to his. "And you would marry me now?"

"I would, indeed, Esther. Nay, I *will!* And God punish me on the day I cause you to regret it!"

"Hush!" said the girl, laying her finger on his lips.

Then she stood thinking for a few minutes.

"I'm glad you said that, Percy. Glad for your sake and mine, though I never can be wife of yours! You may set your father's heart at rest about that. Tell him so from me!"

"Esther, Esther, you cannot be in earnest! Surely you have not ceased to love me?"

"No; that I cannot do—never. Mine isn't a changeful nature, and to love once means to love always with me. Besides," here her quiet voice faltered, "you are the father of my boy!"

Her boy! Percy gave a start of surprise and remembrance. He had quite forgotten that! Then his face grew flushed and eager.

"Of course, and he is to be considered too. Will you let him be nameless and fatherless, when by a word you can give him a home and a father?"

Esther's breath came quick and fast; she half held out her hands, but quickly drew them back again, and sank white and trembling on a seat.

Percy thought she was going to faint, and bent over her in concern. As she

felt his warm breath on her cheek and his arms encircling her, her resolution seemed to die ; and all the woman in her groaned to lay her head on his breast and say, “ You have conquered ; take me. Such as I am, I am all yours ! ”

Then other thoughts came thronging to her. Would he love her long if all his future was marred and spoiled through her ? Had not his father threatened to disinherit him and cast him off at once if he disobeyed ? “ God help me to do what is best for him,” she prayed under her breath. “ Let me not be tempted beyond my strength.”

“ Go, Percy, do not try to turn me, for I have made up my mind.”

“ And will you not let me see the child ? ”

Then at last she brought her baby ; a fine strong little fellow, with dark eyes like his own.

Percy touched the little velvet cheek with one finger, and a thrill of mingled shame and affection ran through him.

It was his own—flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone—and yet he could claim no kinship with it; no right save what its mother gave him.

Poor wronged little mite, whose fault but his was it that the boy was born nameless and despised?

His heart was touched, and a desperate longing to atone came over him.

“Esther, he is mine, too. Give me a right to protect him?”

But Esther’s moment of weakness was gone. She hugged her baby closer to her; and stood there stern and white, as though ready to defy the world on its behalf.

It was for Percy’s sake, though, that she refused, and he knew it; for he began to see the reason. It made him savage.

She had attained a height of self-sacrifice to which he could never scale, and it already made him feel a miserable creature beside her.

She was passing away from him, too, his power over her seemed gone now; and that was enough to make her tenfold more dear. Well, she should not gain her point; at any rate he would take care to let her know that!

“ You think I don’t see what you are driving at,” he said at last, roughly, “ but let me tell you that I will not go back and eat humble pie; not if you never marry me. If you don’t, I—I’ll go to the devil, that’s all ! ”

And having delivered himself of this noble threat, Percy waited for the result with breathless eagerness. Much to his amazement Esther still kept firm.

It was the idle talk of a boy, nothing more ! She seemed by her suffering and

her sorrow to have grown years and years older than he. His love (if love it was still) would not last, and then—then, why then he would be ashamed of her and of her child. Never! He should never be the last, at any rate.

“Oh, Percy, say good-bye, and go! I cannot bear more now;—but I will never alter in this!” she added hastily; as he muttered something of “another time.”

“You are cold, changed, and heartless,” cried the young man, throwing away the hand she gave him; and yet not daring to offer a closer embrace before they parted.

“But it will make no difference, not a bit! You shall not be able to say that you gave up all and I nothing!” and with an angry look, in which unwilling admiration and passionate love mingled, he went off; slamming the door behind him.

Esther stood gazing after him in a half-unconscious sort of state, till her baby began to whimper ; then she caught it up, and kissed it lovingly.

“ Did I do wrong, my darling, that I thought of him more than of you ? ” she murmured in a low voice ; then her composure gave way, and she cried, but still restrainedly, so as not to disturb the child.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

But when the little one was hushed to sleep the calmness Esther had maintained with such effort was not long in giving way.

Then the poor girl threw herself down on the ground by the side of the bed where her baby lay, and sobbed hysterically. Never had her love for Percy been so great as now that she had renounced him for ever.

She had loved him before, perhaps as much as it was possible for her to love in the undeveloped state of her mind, and with both the kind and degree of love which Percy, as he then was, could have awakened in any woman. But the girl's

nature had developed and grown higher—not through her sin, but through the suffering and penitence, which made such sin impossible to her for evermore. And that day, too, she had seen and recognized in Percy, not the selfish, discontented boy, who was the real Percy ; but the heroic, self-forgetting man, who was the ideal one.

In the moment when their eyes met as they parted, she saw in his the dawn of a pure and more reverent affection ; but, alas ! in that moment only had she first awokened to what they had both for ever forfeited.

She blamed Percy no more for the wrong he had done her ; indeed, she half forgot it in the wrong she had also done to him.

Had she but been better, his love might have been one with his religion. Married to a woman he reverenced as well as

loved, of what might he not have been worthy; seeing there yet remained so much of nobility in him as had been shown that day?

Ah, yes; and but for the past, she herself might have been that woman!

Did she not read it in his eyes, when for the first time in their lives soul responded to soul; and unconsciously—in their mutual renunciation of self—called on the other for heroism and self-denial?

It needed not for Esther to argue with herself that marriage with her would mean harm to Percy, for it was an instinctive consciousness with her. Their love had wrought them loss and debasement in the past. It was a righteous judgment that only by separation and suffering could that love work them good in the future.

The imaginative power which, while Esther's nature slept, had made her

dreams vivid and beautiful ; now that she had been rudely awakened to the facts of life, served but to make her realize them more clearly, more impressively.

It needed no knowledge gained by actual experience to teach this girl that once married to the man who now offered her his name, the respect and reverence he was beginning to feel for her now would vanish utterly ; and that the love he might continue to feel for a woman whose character was unsullied could not long be hers. He would come to regard her either with a contemptuous dislike or indifference ; or, at best, a contemptuous fondness ; which would be still more unbearable.

And yet—what was the future without him ?

She had spoken bravely enough of “bearing her shame ;” and had, while she so spoke, been sustained by a vague

vision of herself rising above the judgment of the cruel world; which has no faith in a *woman* sinning and yet winning her way back to purity and goodness. But now, when it was too late, it almost seemed as though she had miscalculated her strength.

She was so young. Only eighteen, she thought, with a touch of wondering self-pity.

How would she bear the long, long years of life which in all probability were yet before her? Life that could have no hope to cling to—what was there left to hope for? She ought to have died when her baby was born. It seemed the right thing, the only right thing to have happened. And surely, she had gone through enough before to have killed any happy woman. Only happy women die easily; the wretched live on whether they wish it or no!

Her baby? Oh, God, the time might come when she would not dare to look into even *his* eyes, lest she should read there contempt for the frailty of the mother who bore him; anger at his own heritage of shame.

And at this thought another pang came to her. Had she done right, after all?

Was it well to save the father at the expense of the child? No, no; she was sure it was wrong now!

She would call him back; tell him she would marry him now, rather than that her baby should grow up to hate and despise her. Marriage covered so many sins and follies in the world's opinion; in time even hers might be forgotten. Forgotten by the world—yes; but remembered always by herself, and by the father of her child!

No, the wrong was done now. Nothing on earth could alter that. Even God

Himself would not be able to undo it, or the shame of it, though she were to cry to Him for ever!

Hopelessly she rose from the floor, and bent over her boy. How innocent he looked, and how beautiful! Innocent, as though his mother had been an honoured wife; beautiful, as though his beauty were the pride of a house where he was rightful heir. But the only house with which he could claim kinship was the house where he lay now; and the mother, who bent over him at that moment, scarcely dared to touch him; lest that touch should sully his exquisite purity.

As she stood so a tear fell from her eyes upon the little dimpled cheek; and the baby moved uneasily, and moaned in his sleep.

With a low wail of pain the mother moved from him.

To her excited imagination it seemed as though it were her guilty presence that disturbed the child ; scaring away from his pillow the good angels, which mothers fancy watch by their babies' beds, and whisper in their ears echoes of the songs they sing in Heaven.

Poor, heart-broken Esther ! The sorrow of the past faded before the supreme anguish of that moment.

Where, oh where could she turn for help or consolation, when even her own baby could not bear her near him ?

There was but one possible refuge.

The girl fell on her knees, and tried to pray. Prayed that God would make her pure, for the sake of the little white soul, which had none other but her to cling to in this world of sin and sorrow ; prayed that her influence might never be for anything but good to him.

Then, rising, she crept softly back.

Even yet she dared not take him in her arms, though her heart yearned to hold him there again. Instead, she stroked with a timid fore-finger the tiny pink hand which lay on the coverlet. All at once the baby fingers closed tightly on hers, and the wee fellow smiled in his sleep.

Then Esther's head was bowed in gratitude; for she accepted this as a token that her prayer was heard.

Even when, later on, Alick came with the startling news that Percy had enlisted in a regiment then passing through the town; Esther could not feel so crushed by the blow as Alick had feared she would be.

There was One above who had heard her prayer, could she not leave the rest in His hands?

## CHAPTER XIX.

MR. SCOTT'S first feeling, on glancing at Dick Hepple's letter, was one of utter disbelief; but before he had got to the end of it, he grew painfully uneasy. Even then, however, it failed to have the weight Dick expected. The farmer knew well enough—at least, he had been told often enough—that there had been love-passages between his son and the schoolmaster's daughter, and the finding of the cigar-case was neither here nor there.

Then, as Dick knew nothing of Esther Grey's disappearance from Fordham, all that he was able to allege seemed to Mr. Scott mere vulgar gossip; easily

credited by a man of low nature and coarse up-bringing, such as he set down Dick Hepple to be.

What perhaps grated most on Mr. Scott, though, was the one fact, painfully evident in the letter, of the ex-mole-catcher's own passionate love for the girl spoken of. And yet this was what gave most hope when thought over.

What more likely than that the whole story was a piece of jealous revenge on the part of a rejected lover?

But the idea of Dick Hepple and his boy as rivals hurt the old man's pride terribly, and lowered poor Esther still more in his eyes. She must be an impudent hussy, and no mistake! To have encouraged such a ne'er-do-well as this at the very time she was leading his Percy away—for the fellow would never have made such a fool of himself for her sake, unless she had encouraged him.

Mr. Scott and Nelly had at any time little communication with the village, and less so now than ever. For the old man —after being away some time, making inquiries as to his wife's death—shrank from seeing any one. So it was not surprising that the news of Esther's flight had not reached either of them.

Mrs. Brown had heard it, of course; but as she had heard the name of her young master coupled with it, she not only held her own tongue, but impressed upon others the necessity of silence for the present. Her poor master had been bothered enough lately; and as for Miss Nelly, whom she loved well in her own fashion, it would go hard if she allowed any one to vex her heart with such a tale as that!

Still, spite of all this, as he read and re-read Dick Hepple's scrawl, Mr. Scott grew more and more uneasy. The ring

of agony that echoed in every line of it showed at least the man's own belief in what he was saying; and Percy's father passed a sleepless night. He went over and over every detail of the interview he had had with his son before the departure of the latter for college.

He recalled the lad's white face when the name of Esther Grey was first mentioned; his weak, half-hearted appeal when commanded to give up any thoughts of her at once—an appeal which at the time struck the old man as so cowardly, that he half despised the one who made it—then the vague denial of any serious intention, followed by days of gloom and sullenness preceding his departure.

What if it were true, after all?

As the morning hours passed the father grew more and more restless. He must know the worst! And yet—how was he of all people to get at the truth. Why,

no one in the village would dare to repeat to him the story they would talk over freely enough behind his back.

Well, at least he would walk down to Fordham. Perhaps he might come across old Grey. It would be easy enough to judge from his manner whether any suspicion was in his mind. After that, a call at the post-office. There might chance to be a letter from Percy ; the lad had been long in writing. If so, it would be better to get it than wait for the messenger who took the letters up to the farm.

As he went down the street, he was surprised to see the children playing about on the green, instead of being at their lessons.

While Mrs. Little, the postmistress, kept turning over the packets of letters to find the ones for the farm ; Mr. Scott, contrary to his usual habit, began to talk,

leading up to the subject of which his mind was full.

"What's up to-day, that the bairns are at play instead of their books?" he asked.

The woman looked up at him curiously for a moment, then returned to her task.

"Bless us! Have ye not heard what's happened?" she said, quickly. "The doctor's lass was in a bit syne, and she let fall that her master had been sent for to the schoolhouse. It seems old Grey has had a stroke or something; and no wonder either, for though he may look kind o' hard like, it's not to be expected he won't ha' feelin's like the rest on us!"

This speech was a trifle enigmatical, yet somehow it seemed to confirm Mr. Scott's fears.

But he would not betray himself. It was second nature to him now to hide whatever emotion he might feel.

"Poor man, I'm right sorry to hear that! But he's getting an old chap now, and he's been failing sore of late. Well, well; there's his daughter to look after him, and they say she's a handy sort of a lass."

"Mercy on us!" ejaculated the post-mistress.

She had her full share of dread of Mr. Scott in general; but she felt the possibilities of the situation, and had the dramatic instinct of a true gossip. She longed, with artistic fervour, to witness the effect of the revelation which it was in her power to make.

And then just think of the distinction it would confer on her amongst the neighbours, to have it to say she was the first to break the news to Mr. Scott?

"It's maybe not for the likes o' me to say much," she began, demurely; "but, as I was tellin' Mrs. Dunn, no longer

syne than yesterday, I was sure it was our bounden duty to let you know what's goin' on, Mr. Scott! Mrs. Dunn, she said, bad news aye travels fast enough; but I don't think you're the sort that would like to be kept in the dark! So I make free to tell ye that the lass Esther left her home more than a month back. All the village knows; but it stands to reason you would be the last to hear of it!"

It was true, then! The girl was gone—gone perhaps to Percy himself—probably married to him by this time? That was the most likely ending, if the lad had the spirit of a man in him at all.

He—hard, proud man—bit his lip and conquered himself, as he held out a hand, which did not tremble in the least, for his letters; and, making some cool rejoinder, as though he had failed to see the point of the woman's speech, and

was not specially interested by it ; then, bade her a civil good day, and turned his steps homewards.

The letter he held in his hand was the one Percy had written in such mental anguish, and which had cost him so great a moral effort to begin.

Once away from the village, Mr. Scott tore it open hastily ; but small blame to the man if he was now in no mood to be softened by the story it told of selfishness and cowardice, followed too late by penitence and sorrow.

Perhaps if it had been the first revelation, the effect might have been different. But pride was the farmer's chief characteristic ; and to have the account of his son's wrong-doing first told him by a prisoner in Morbury gaol ; and then confirmed by a gossiping postmistress ; was a bad preparation for Percy's heartbroken appeal and pathetic contrition.

" Marry a lass out of a poorhouse ? A nice end to his finnicking notions ! None of the farmers' daughters about here were good enough for my lord ; they were rough, coarse, or vulgar ! Well, he's welcome to her if he likes, only he doesn't darken my door again, I can tell him that ! A liar and a coward too ! Him, the boy I felt so proud of. Why couldn't he have told me the truth then when I begged it of him ? As if I'd ha' hindered him marrying her if he'd had the pluck to do that—but no, no ; he's his mother's own son there," ended the old man, bitterly.

Nelly ran forward to meet her father.

" Any letter from Percy ? " she cried, eagerly ; then catching sight of the stern face, felt alarmed. What new horror had fallen on them ?

" Yes, there's a letter, but it's not fit for the likes of you to read," cried the

farmer. "And, look here, lass, never you mention his name again, if ye want to please me! He's a liar and a scoundrel, and I don't want to think of him any more!"

Then he turned wearily into the parlour, utterly ignoring the appealing looks the girl cast on him; and pushing the letter between the bars of the grate, held it there until it was all consumed. He would certainly not answer it—indeed, what answer could he give?

But his other letters remained unread; and when Nelly came, with her red and swollen eyes, to tell him that dinner was on the table, he rose as if to go there, and then suddenly snatching up his hat, walked out without a word of explanation.

## CHAPTER XX.

DICK HEPPLE had cunning enough, when he took the blank leaf out of his prison bible, to tear out also several printed pages; so that, although the discovery of his outrage was all the sooner made perhaps, it was ascribed simply to a piece of wanton mischief on his part; and no suspicion of the real state of the case was ever awakened. The only result, therefore, was the transfer of Dick to a punishment cell for the remainder of his term; and he cared little for that! It gave him more time for thought; and his mind ran for ever on schemes of revenge, to be taken on Percy Scott when re-

leased; if the letter failed to do the good he wished.

Once more becoming his own master, his first thought was to set out for Fordham. Before the day of his discharge was over, indeed, he was making his way there as fast as possible. He scarcely cared whether he would have to face his old acquaintances again or not, although at another time he might have felt ashamed to meet them.

But in his intense longing to hear all that had happened to the woman he loved so faithfully, considerations of self were completely swallowed up.

It was late in the afternoon of the day following his release before he entered the long, straggling village street. To his intense disappointment he then saw that the shutters of the windows in the schoolroom were already closed. He had counted upon going direct to the

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schoolhouse, and seeing Esther alone, while her father was still busy with the children.

Finding this to be impossible, his course was more difficult. He could not bring himself to ask news of the village people; and shrank from hearing their coarse comments upon the girl.

As little did he wish to see Percy Scott's father before he had some more definite information as to the course of events.

The schoolhouse was on the outskirts of the village, so Dick managed to hang about there unnoticed in the gathering darkness.

He knew the ways of the inmates, and waited patiently until six o'clock. At that time he remembered Esther used to run along to the village for her evening supply of milk.

Many a time before he had hung about

there to catch a glimpse of her slim figure, or exchange a kindly word of greeting.

But this once he waited in vain. The door remained closed, and the cold wind whistled drearily over the low roof, while every now and again a flake of snow blew against his face.

After a while, however, a light shone through the window of the little parlour, where there were no shutters; and a figure moved to and fro there, casting its shadow on the blind.

A woman's figure; but one glance sufficed to tell Dick that it was not Esther's!

An uneasy feeling crept over him, and—strong man as he was—his heart stood still at the fears aroused by the mere sight of a strange shadow on a window blind.

She must be ill—or worse!

He could bear this no longer ! He must know the truth, and at once.

Knocking hastily at the door, his worst fears were confirmed ; for it was opened by an old woman, whose presence always betokened serious sickness in Fordham. Kitty Baty, better known as " Aud Kitty," had buried, one after another, a husband and five children, and so was supposed to know more of nursing and burying than any woman in the place.. She had, therefore, quite a little local reputation, and in all cases of illness it was quite the right thing to call in " aud Kitty."

At sight of Dick she held up her hands in amazement.

" Why, Dick Hepple, is't you, of all folks i' the world ? " she exclaimed. " Come yer ways in, my man; ye look just fit to drop."

Kitty had noticed the white face and

faltering lips, which refused to ask the question his heart framed. And, being sympathetic in her own rough fashion, she felt sorry for him. She was a woman who somehow knew more of most people's affairs than they imagined possible. So not only did she know that Dick had been hardly treated; but she also suspected that he loved, and loved hopelessly, the schoolmaster's daughter.

"Sit ye down a bit," she said, opening the door of the kitchen as she spoke. "Lord, ye wouldn't believe how lonesome it is here of a night, with only the old man, and him speechless and bed-ridden forbye! I'll be rare and pleased to have a crack wi' ye!"

And, sitting down opposite to Dick, she stirred the fire into a cheery blaze, and prepared for a gossip over recent events.

"Where's—where's Esther?" gasped

out Dick at last, turning his haggard face towards her.

“Eh, hinnies ! Ha’ ye not heard what’s happened ?” cried Kitty, wondering.

Then she, scarcely knowing where to begin, tried to give him the history of the past few weeks. The scene at the inn, followed by Esther’s disappearance from home—turned out, it was believed, by her father into the cold autumn night in his mad fury at the discovery of her disgrace ; then the old man’s effort to go about as usual, never either mentioning his daughter’s name, nor allowing it to be spoken in his presence ; and how he grew whiter and more stern-looking, but forgot half his duties—forgot to find fault with the scholars if they broke the rules or neglected their lessons ; and then how one morning the neighbours passing to their work had noticed the door still shut ; and, breaking in, found

the schoolmaster lying paralyzed and speechless on the floor, unable to move hand or foot.

Dick scarcely listened as Kitty talked on and on. His mind grasped the one great fact. Esther was gone, and no one knew where. As for pitying her father, such a thought never crossed his mind! A muttered curse only rose to his lips when mention was made of the supposed harshness with which the girl had been treated.

All at once he started to his feet.

He would find her—or find at least the coward who had betrayed and then deserted her. And then—why, then he would see what came next, he thought, grimly!

He knew now that Percy Scott had been sent to college—an agricultural college. Well, there were not many of them; it would be easy enough to find

this. He would go there himself, and perhaps—oh, how he wished it might be so—in finding Percy he might find Esther too. What more natural than that she should have gone to her lover for shelter and protection, when turned so cruelly out of her home? Perhaps the fellow had even done the right thing at last, and married her—late though it was to make the reparation?

There was just one thing more Dick thought he might do before leaving Fordham. This was to see Mr. Scott. It was not very likely Percy's father would tell anything, even if he knew; still it was a chance, after all.

But when Dick, with this idea in his head, reached Elm-tree Farm, Mr. Scott refused to see him at all; and the poor fellow, baffled for the time being, but not one whit less determined for all that, turned away into the darkness.

## CHAPTER XXI.

ALICK had been too much interested in the history of these lives with which he had so curiously been brought into contact, to allow him easily to rest content without knowing how things would end ; so it happened that he remained in Wrekenton considerably longer than he had otherwise intended.

After visiting a few of the neighbouring towns, and studying the statistics they afforded, he had utilized his spare time in writing the promised series of articles on Pauperism ; and that being done, he felt at liberty to delay his return to London for some weeks longer.

He had grown much attached to Percy, and was deeply grieved over the lad's reckless folly in enlisting, which he felt would only further embitter his father against him ; and having persuaded Percy to write again and tell the whole tale, he waited anxiously to hear Mr. Scott's reply to his son.

It came at length ; but it was a short and bitter letter, and seemed to make reconciliation all but hopeless ; nevertheless, Alick resolved to run over to Fordham again ; he would try to soften Mr. Scott's feelings towards Percy ; and above all, his heart yearned to see Nelly and try to comfort her.

He made one or two efforts to introduce the subject to Mr. Scott, but the old man at first would not appear to hear ; and then, finding Alick not easily silenced, absolutely forbid the topic to be mentioned to him again. This being so, Alick was

forced to devote himself to the other part of his task, and this truly was pleasant enough to him.

He was in a strangely softened, impressionable state of mind; his old subjects of thought did not seem so engrossing, his ideas so clear, nor his opinions so fixed, as before all the sorrow and sin he had been brought so near to in the last few weeks.

Nothing seemed so good to him now as to be as much with his sweetheart as possible; to listen to her sweet innocent talk, and comfort her in the shock and grief, which for a time seemed to crush even her buoyant nature to the ground.

Poor happy, laughing Nelly! It came very hard upon her.

All her dreams of an ideal mother in Heaven had been rudely broken before; but that was nothing to this terrible reality. Her nature was a wonderfully

pure one, and she could hardly understand temptation, much less shameful sin.

Even at night, when no eyes saw her, she would cover her face with her hands at the remembrance of what had happened, hiding her hot cheeks and lying awake for hours in a very agony of shame. The mother whose memory she had almost worshipped ; and the brother she had tried so hard to look up to !

At first she could not bear to meet even Alick ; but in time nature conquered. Nelly was a very womanly woman. Some one to lean on in sorrow, and cry with, or be comforted by, was a necessity to the girl.

And her father, since all this dreadful news came, was sterner and more unapproachable than ever. So Alick grew dearer day by day to the sorrowing and shame-stricken girl. He was so strong, yet so tender ; so full of sympathy, and

yet such a man with it all. It was something to have a tower of defence when all the world seemed at war.

After a fit of weeping, which Alick would not attempt to stop, knowing there was healing in the easy-flowing tears, the weary head would be laid on his breast, and he would gather the pretty girlish form into his arms; and she would lie there quietly, and grow comforted. Then the soft brown eyes would be lifted to thank him with a tender pathetic look, and the young fellow would feel intensely happy.

The sorrow of those weeks really drew them nearer than anything else could have done. They could never be content apart again.

Mr. Scott, however, did not seem quite so satisfied as heretofore with the state of affairs.

Not at any time a very loquacious

man, he talked less than ever now; and would sit smoking in silence or looking into the fire moodily.

One night as Alick was leaving, he took his pipe out of his mouth and waved him back gravely.

"I want a few words alone with you, young man."

Nelly glanced timorously in his face. She was very much afraid of her father. Though he had always been kind to her, she knew too well how stern he could be.

Oh, dear, what could he want with Alick? If Alick had not been so very, very good, she would have thought her father angry with him. But it was—the idea was too absurd!

Nevertheless she clasped her hands together tightly, and hesitated before leaving them alone together. But Mr. Scott was not a man to be disobeyed, and

he gave a significant glance towards the door ; so creeping up to his chair, trembling little Nelly put her arms round his neck, and kissed him timidly on the cheek.

“ Remember how good Alick is, father,” she whispered, softly. “ And don’t offend my—our one friend ; ” and then, terrified at having betrayed her feelings, she ran off to her room.

What could it be ? Father must be vexed to look so queer as he did to-night ! But Alick was not to blame, she was sure of that. And the loving girl stamped her little foot and flashed glances of angry defiance into vacancy at the bare idea.

Just as if she mightn’t have been allowed to stay in the room and hear things that were as much her business as anybody’s, for was not Alick her *friend* ? Even to herself, at times, the little dissembler

would not own the truth and say her lover !

And yet, while the talk was going on downstairs, and long after it was over, poor Nelly made herself miserable ; thinking all sorts of foolish, agonizing, groundless things !

“ Now, Alick Lisle, you’ve been coming here nigh upon every day, and philandering with that girl of mine, and I’ve never interfered——”

“ But, Mr. Scott, you must have seen I loved her,” burst in Alick ; “ and she—she too——”

“ Stop a bit, young man,” said Mr. Scott, in a peremptory way ; “ let me say my say first, and then you can answer. But don’t interrupt me before I’ve done. Now what I want to say is this. I’ve been told that you’re one of them sort that don’t believe in law, either of God or man ; one of these mischievous chaps

who'd turn old England upside down if ye had ye're own ways; cut it up into little bits and divide it amongst ye, giving no preference to the man that has lived saving and sober, and managed to scrape up a tidy bit of money ! Now what have you got to say to that point, eh ? ”

“ Who told you all this ? ” asked Alick, slowly.

“ Never you mind that ! It was one that has a right to know, anyway. What you've got to do is this, answer my questions as straightforward as possible, and tell me first and foremost, do you believe in God ? ”

“ I—I hardly know,” replied Alick, hesitatingly. “ I have doubts ; but many a man has them, and is yet able to believe in Him honestly at last. I would give half my life to be sure ! ” he ended, emphatically.

The truth is it was the vicar who had

put the fact of Alick's atheism before Mr. Scott. Nelly was one of his favourites among the village girls; she was so gentle, so believing, so delightfully orthodox in these latter degenerate days; when even babes and sucklings are so prone to question the truth of doctrines enunciated by their pastors and masters.

She was a Sunday-school teacher; a district visitor; in fact everything that was right and proper; and so when it came to the good vicar's ears that she was actually engaged to be married to that dreadful wicked unbeliever, young Lisle, the poor man was almost distracted.

It was his duty at once to warn Mr. Scott of his daughter's danger. Probably the worthy farmer did not know what a pestilential infidel Alick Lisle was; the worst of it being that the fellow lived a seemingly good and cleanly life, which made him all the more dangerous in lead-

ing others astray, and would be no better for himself in the end. For the vicar—like an orthodox Churchman as he was—firmly believed in the unacceptability of good works devoid of faith.

Farmer Scott had not even taken the trouble to think about Alick Lisle's writing before, save as a matter of pounds, shillings and pence ; but he was properly impressed when the vicar put the case before him.

“ To be sure, the lad seemed a decent, steady young fellow,” he thought, scratching his head in perplexity ; “ but if the parson said he was bad, why he must be bad, and that's a fact. Pity, though, for the little lass seemed terribly set on him, and she had a dreary life of it there, he knew that only too well ! And when he himself had looked over the fact of the lad being poor, in consideration of the fact that he had known him all his life,

and thought he was sure to get on, so steady and plodding and well-behaved as he was, and because he hated fine gentlemen so. Curse them, had he not a right? And Alick seemed to understand Nelly right well, and would take such care of her! It was too bad! But no one who refused to go to church like a respectable man should have his daughter. Hadn't *he* laughed at church and the parsons, the black-hearted scoundrel that he was?

"Look here, lad, I don't want to be harder on you than I can help, for I've always liked ye, and ye've been a good son to a weary kind of mother; and a good son makes a good husband, I've always held," and here Mr. Scott set his teeth and scowled, as he remembered a son who had not been good.

"But one thing I must be sure on before I let you get too dear to my Nelly, and that is that you'll go to church re-

spectably on Sundays, and believe in what the parson tells us. And your books, I'm told they're not safe ; they're trying to turn things topsy-turvy, somehow ; and so if ye cannot give me your word to let well be well—because old England isn't so far amiss to my way of thinking—why you may say good-bye to Nelly and me, and the sooner your back's turned the better, say I."

And after this long and sage speech the farmer knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and laid it aside for the night. He had spoken his mind, and he felt the better for it.

Alick, on his part, was shaken by a score of different emotions. To give up the opinions he had arrived at through so much pain and perplexity, and again to be tossed on a sea of doubt ; or to consciously lie and subscribe to a creed he had ceased to believe in. To lose for

ever his own esteem, and be a self-seeking humbug !

But on the other hand—to lose Nelly!

A pang darted through him at the very thought. It made him stamp his foot with pain. How would he bear the reality? And then, after all, was it much to ask of him? That he should give up writing on theological subjects, and go to church now and then. Surely that wouldn't be very difficult to do?

He put his hand to his brow in a perplexed manner, and his eyes sought the ground.

"Perhaps you do me an injustice," he said, in a low troubled voice. "I could explain things to you if you would hear me!"

"Not to-night, lad; not to-night! Think over what I've said, and answer me when you're quite clear in the head about your opinions. But I won't hear

another word to-night," and with a nod of dismissal the farmer stalked off to see that all was made safe about the house.

## CHAPTER XXII.

“WHAT did father want, Alick?” asked Nelly, coaxingly, the next day, as they were sitting together in the old oak parlour.

Nelly had never looked so bewitching, Alick thought. The fear of losing her made her doubly dear to him.

Her soft dark merino dress showed to perfection every line of her round supple figure, and it made her fair rose-flushed face look fairer than ever. Then she was softer, more tender, more caressing than usual; the touch of anxiety she felt for Alick making her less careful to hide her

love, less full of maidenly reserve than her lover had ever known her.

How could he give her up? All the brightness to go out of his life, and leave him with nothing to hope for, nothing to work for—nothing even to live for.

So he thought in the softened mood which had taken hold of him. Life seemed valueless if bereft of the one woman he loved.

He was a young strong man, and he loved the girl—truly and purely indeed—but with the full intense passion of manhood.

He had lain awake all night; thinking, resolving, battling; making determinations, only to argue himself out of them as fast as they were made; and the morning came to find him worn and exhausted, but as far from knowing his own mind as when he lay down.

How he despised himself one moment as a moral coward and a contemptible humbug; the next, Nelly's face would rise before him in the darkness, and in an overpowering rush of emotion he would deem all things pardonable to gain her; to make her his own, his darling wife. No, no, come what might he could not give her up.

This restless, feverish night made him nervous, emotional; every touch of Nelly's hand, every glance of her bright eyes, thrilled through him. He was scarcely master of his own judgment; and after an hour of her sweet company, felt almost ready to conform to and believe in any creed, however monstrous.

"Her God should be his God," he thought; carried out of himself by the greatness of his passion, and glad to fancy himself safely anchored once more. He didn't answer Nelly's question; he

simply took her hands in his and looked into her eyes.

“ Could you bear us to part now, darling ? Tell me you could not bear us to part ? ” he said, with a world of wild entreaty in his voice.

The tears started to the girl’s eyes at the thought. “ Did it mean *that* ? ” she asked in affright. “ Oh, surely it did not mean *that*, Alick ? You know I could not bear it. Dear Alick, there seems no one but you now.”

And Nelly crept closer to her lover, and put her round warm arm about his neck. He started at the touch ; and then drawing her quickly to him, kissed her passionately, almost savagely.

“ And do they think they shall take you from me ? ” he said, in fierce scorn. “ Never, never. I would kill you and myself sooner ! ”

Nelly looked at his flushed face and knitted brow, and felt a little afraid.

"Hush, Alick, you frighten me," she whispered; and hid her face upon his breast.

Then his mood changed; and he called himself a brute and a coward for frightening his darling sweetheart so; and stroked her hair and her cheeks, and whispered soft tender little speeches into her ear; until she smiled at his nonsense, and crept out from her hiding-place again.

"Nelly, can you trust me?" he asked, after his fit of passion was over, and they had sat quietly for a while.

"What a question! Why, of course I can, Alick. But what do you mean by trusting you?"

"Oh, I don't quite know. Trust me in everything, I mean, right through and through. There are lots of people who

will tell you I am wicked, and heterodox, and dangerous ; just because I have dared to think things out for myself, instead of taking them for granted as people do, who won't be bothered to use their brains ; but don't you believe them, my sweet one, if you don't really want to drive me to the bad altogether ! ”

“ Heterodox ? *Are* you heterodox, Alick ? ” asked Nelly, rather alarmed by the long word.

“ Well, I suppose I am, Nelly, if the truth must be told. How can I believe what goes against my reason ? But don't look so shocked, my darling ; try not to be shocked, for there is nothing very bad in that, whatever they may tell you ; and Nelly—oh, don't turn away ! I will try to believe everything you wish me ; I will indeed ! Nelly, I am yours body and soul ; do with me what you will—only be mine ! ” and

agonized by the expression of repulsion on the girl's face, Alick knelt beside her; and looked up with so humble and pitiful an appeal, that even Nelly's orthodox heart melted within her.

She could not help feeling a little throb of pride at this exhibition of her supremacy. What woman could have resisted the charm of such a moment? She stooped and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "Be good," she said, "and—and think like other people if you can! I will pray God to help you. I cannot argue with you"—here Alick shuddered—"because I am not clever, you know; but I can pray for you, that's all I can do."

"And if such prayers are ever answered, surely yours ought to be, my Nelly," replied Alick, fervently; and so peace was restored.

Then Mr. Scott, whose words of the

night before were spoken very regretfully, and entirely from a sense of duty, was only too ready to hear whatever Alick had to say on the subject in his own defence.

And the young fellow managed to make a very good case out for himself. He declared that he was entirely open to conviction, and did not even object to be talked to by the parson; as Mr. Scott, who felt himself no match for Alick, hinted might possibly happen before long.

Perhaps Alick was not consciously a hypocrite in all this. He knew that the vicar's arguments would probably not have much weight with him; but he was willing enough to hear them, and that was all Mr. Scott asked. And he was excited, carried out of himself; and could not at the time recover the train of reasoning by which he had once so subtly

and powerfully, in his own estimation, overthrown all the formulæ and doctrines of Christianity.

Nelly wished him to think like other people. Well, if he didn't manage this, it wouldn't be for want of trying !

“Darling Nelly, you are too sweet, too dear to be given up for any theory ! You are my own, the first passion of my life ; I will never, never let any word or deed of mine divide us.”

So a sort of truce was patched up ; and Alick Lisle was still allowed to visit at Elm-tree Farm during the brief remainder of his stay at Fordham, on consideration of his not setting folks' teeth on edge with new-fangled ideas, which could never be a bit of good in the end ! He was on trial, as it were.

Alas for Alick's high-flown fancies of great deeds to be done for humanity, and great truths to be promulgated, even in

defiance of all existing laws and creeds ! Where had his Quixotic notions led him, and how had they served him in time of need ?

Humanity is great ; but human nature is greater, and the latter had conquered, for the time being, at all events.

Alick was wildly, ecstatically happy for a week ! Then came retribution in the shape of shame and self-disgust and contempt unutterable. He was a living lie. He had sold his freedom of thought, his hard-fought-out convictions. He deserved to have the little rift within the lute—and he had it ! He was glad when the time came to return to London—even though it parted him from Nelly—for there perchance he could forget himself and his own hypocrisy.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

ESTHER had resolutely refused any help from Percy; and, indeed, had she not done so, he had little to bestow now that his father had cast him off. After having somewhat regained her strength, she left the poorhouse; and was struggling to make a livelihood in Wrekenton by sewing for some ladies, to whom the matron had recommended her.

Of course, it would be slow starvation, as Alick saw at once, in a brief interview he had with her before leaving the town; and during his stay at Fordham, the young man paid Mr. Grey more than

one visit to try and bring about a reconciliation.

He found Adam Grey—not at the schoolhouse—but just removed from there to a tiny, two-roomed cottage on the hillside above the village.

There was no chance of Adam Grey's recovery; and so a new master must needs be appointed; and Squire Sutton, having this cottage unoccupied, had promised it to him rent-free for the rest of his life. Mr. Grey had saved a little money, so would be above want while he lived; and as he was absolutely disabled by his paralytic stroke, for his sake, as well as for Esther's, it seemed desirable for her to return.

The old man had recovered his speech, and appeared not displeased to see a stranger; but no sooner had Alick mentioned the object of his visit, than Esther's father went into a perfect paroxysm of rage.

Receive his daughter back—the wanton hussy, who had brought disgrace and shame upon her father's honest name ? No, by God, he wouldn't !

“ Suffered,” had she ? Serve her right, too ! Did Mr. Lisle think that he, her father, hadn't suffered ? Was not this very affliction of his brought on by his only child's sin, and would Mr. Lisle talk about suffering after that ?

Alick let the fit of passion pass—he knew enough of the disease to be aware that it left little power to control the feelings—and looking at the prostrate, disabled man, the strong young fellow felt strangely pitiful ! He might have been a hard, unsympathetic man, as the neighbours reported ; and as the very little Esther had said of her father tended to confirm ; but, after all, it was likely enough he loved the girl more than he had shown, and it was probably true

that his illness was the result of the blow  
her sin had given him.

Something perhaps of these thoughts,  
and the pity he felt, showed in Alick's  
face; for by-and-by Adam Grey grew  
calmer, and looked at him a little wist-  
fully. "I'm an old man, Mr. Lisle, and  
it's hard to be beholden to strangers  
when one's own flesh and blood should  
be by to wait on one; but I couldn't bear  
to have her here, and never be able to  
forget that my Mary's child had come  
to shame!"

Still, when Alick came again, just  
before leaving Fordham, he found Esther's  
father more easy to persuade.

"Yes, he would take her back again,  
if she liked to come; but she must have  
nothing to say to that young scoundrel  
again, or she'd have to be off about her  
business pretty sharp!"

It was a great concession, though

harshly given, and Alick turned away more contented. The girl would be better at home—even with this hard old man—than struggling for bread alone in the cruel town ; and, after all, was it not the love of his heart that had influenced her father to consent to her return ?

Alick tried to think so ; and hated himself that he had noticed Adam Grey looking round discontentedly at the untidy room, and fidgeting when Kitty paced to and fro in a pair of squeaking shoes ; and could not dispossess himself of the idea that the invalid remembered that his daughter would be a more orderly and less irritating nurse.

Having heard through Alick of her father's illness, and his consent to her return, it was not long before Esther reached her home.

It was a bitter day ; and she had to struggle against the wind, carrying her

child in her arms from the little station three miles distant.

She glanced wistfully at the school-house as she passed, the place where so many of her happiest dreams had visited her; at the window, where she used to sit and think of her lover; the garden seat, from which she used to watch the summer sunsets amidst the flowers—where also Dick had said good-bye. Poor Dick, who had so wanted to serve her, and whose help she thought she never could need while Percy was her own. Then, as her eyes fell on the door of the cottage, she shuddered; remembering the night when her father had turned her out into the cruel bitter cold and darkness.

She lingered no longer; but hastened on up the hillside path, her face white and set. How would she ever bear the meeting with that father again? What words of love and of forgiveness could

they mutually speak which would obliterate the memory of that dreadful scene ?

That some such words must be spoken she never doubted.

There was a bright, cheery fire burning in the kitchen when she reached her destination, and old Kitty was bustling about. The door of the inner room was shut when she entered, so Kitty was the only person to greet her.

“Eh, hinny, but ye'll be sair tired ; come ye're ways and sit down a bit, and have a sup of tea afore ye gang in ; ye'll be the better for it afore seeing the aud man ! ”

Willingly enough the girl seated herself ; and the woman—meaning kindly—took the child from her, and began divesting it of the wraps in which it was rolled.

“Eh, but he's a fine laddie, though he *is* a ‘love-bairn,’ and favors the father more than ye, I reckon ! Poor lassie,

ye're not the first that's been taken in wi' a smooth tongue!" and Kitty drew the three-legged stool she had sat down on nearer to Esther, and looked pityingly at her. But suddenly the girl sprang up; and seizing the child, almost roughly, took him with her.

"I'll see my father at once," she said, abruptly; and walked quickly into the other room, closing the door behind her; leaving Kitty open-mouthed in wondering amazement.

"Hoity-toity, my madam! ye needn't be sae uppish! Can a body not speak a word o' pity, without ye takin' the huff after siccan a fashin? But I'll just gang awa' home, and the lassie will have come to hersel' a bit afore langbes, and I'll look in again afore the day's over;" and the coarse, but kindly woman walked away, bearing no ill-will because her proffered sympathy had been repulsed.

Poor Esther! She had acted on the rash impulse of the moment, the mere wish to escape the vulgar pity of the woman, which grated on every fibre of her proud, sensitive nature; and now that she was with her father, she scarcely knew how to act.

She had her child with her; and she had meant to make her first appearance alone, lest the sight should enrage the old man still more; and as for the scene, of mutual asking and receiving of forgiveness, which she had fondly pictured; she was no sooner in the presence of her father than she knew it was absolutely impossible that it should take place.

There had always been a lack of sympathy between them; and, notwithstanding all the pity she felt for the old man lying there helpless, and the feeling of remorse that came over her, as it struck her for the first time that she might have

been the means of bringing this dreadful affliction on him ; after one glance at the hard, unresponsive face, she could no more have spoken of her sorrow or her repentance than she could have flown.

There was one thing she *could* do, however, and she did it !

The old man had slipped from his pillows, and was lying in an awkward, and visibly uncomfortable position, with no power to raise himself.

Without a word being spoken between them, she had laid the infant on the floor, and readjusted the pillows ; smoothing the counterpane, and placing the helpless grey head in comfort once more.

“ Is that better, father ? ” she asked, quietly.

Perhaps there was a sort of prophecy in these being the first words of greeting that passed her lips ; for her life in the future she felt must be spent in trying to

alleviate the sufferings he had to endure, without hope of thanks or gratitude from him in return.

“Yes. It’s not so bad ; and if you’ll fetch me a sup of milk, I could take it ; for I’m feeling faint.”

Esther turned away to seek the required drink in the little pantry, dropping at once into her place in the house ; and the dreaded and yet hoped-for meeting was effected.

Is it not so that half the tragedies of our lives are bridged over ? No high-flown eloquence—no pathetic tenderness ; but some trivial, commonplace sentence opens at once the new chapter of our lives, and shows that the leaf is turned over which held the record of the last !

## CHAPTER XXIV.

DICK HEPPLE had got an idea into his head, and clung to it with the tenacity common to men whose ideas come slowly. Alick Lisle would know where Percy Scott was. Well, then, why shouldn't he, Dick, find Alick Lisle ; and force him to tell the young scoundrel's whereabouts ?

Alick Lisle lived in London, that he knew ! Well, he supposed there was no reason why Dick Hepple shouldn't go there too ! London was a long way off, but Dick had been there, and further, too, in his time. He could go by rail as

far as he could raise money, and walk the rest easily enough.

He had found out by this time, by dint of dogged watchfulness and cunning questioning, that Percy had enlisted. But where the regiment was stationed—that he did not know yet. Never mind, when he had got so far, there was nothing to hinder him managing the rest.

Alick Lisle was an honest sort of chap, though he had hidden part of the truth when he saw him in Morbury gaol! Perhaps, though, that was only because he had seen how it would pain? At any rate, he was not likely to stand in the way when justice was to be done. Dick felt certain of that.

So Dick set off, and sure enough he got to London before long. Then he began to look about him for Alick Lisle—staying in the mean time with a friend of his (for men like Dick have friends every-

where), a dog-fancier down Whitechapel way.

Dick had tried to get Alick's address from Mrs. Lisle ; but whether that good woman was suspicious of his intentions towards her son, or whether she thought him too low company for Alick in his improved condition, at any rate she had refused to give it. But Dick was shrewd enough, and this didn't daunt him a bit. He began to haunt the publishing offices of various magazines ; and once, indeed, came upon a trace of Alick, who had called upon an editor about his contribution to the next number. Then Dick went home comparatively satisfied ; though, having got separated from him in the crowd, he had lost the chance of speaking to Alick for the time being.

When his friend, the dog-fancier, had asked Dick's opinion upon a newly arrived litter of bull-terrier pups ; and he had

given it, after due consideration and solemnity, the two sat down to their pipes and glasses; and the dog-fancier began to tell how worried he was about a lodger of his who had the upstairs room; and who, he was sure, was slowly dying of starvation; never going out before night-fall, because his clothes were so shabby; and who, being a proud, shy man, would neither beg nor receive help; but shut himself up in his room, with neither food, fire, nor candles. All that day he had never stirred; and Tom Stubbs, being a good-natured fellow, was wondering what he should do.

"Break the door open, o' course," said Dick, emphatically. "What sort of a chap is he—what's his trade, I mean?"

"Dunno, I'm sure; reads a lot, writes a lot; wants to teach, he says; but, Lord, he's a helpless one he is. Doesn't know the odds atween a young mastiff

and a curly St. Bernard's pup, he don't ; " and the dealer in canine property put on a look of contempt unutterable at the man unlearned in dogs. " But he's paid his rent reg'lar, there's no mistake about that, though I don't believe a bite o' meat's crossed his lips this last three days. He turned quite white and faint last time he came in when I was havin' my bit o' steak and bottle o' stout, and the smell came across him ; but as for askin' him to have a snack—if ye believe me, Dick, I couldn't bring myself to it ; it' ud have looked like a liberty ! He's a sort as don't often come Whitechapel way, they don't ! "

" Let's go and knock at his door," said Dick, suddenly. He was very soft-hearted, spite of his rough husk ; and could not bear the notion of any one being in want while he had a copper or two to part with.

Accordingly they went up the narrow stairs and knocked, but with no result. However, after they had been making a terrific noise for some time, they heard a faint moan from inside.

"I'm blowed if I can stand this any longer," cried Dick; and, putting his muscular shoulder to the door, he forced it off its hinges in no time. "Charge me wi' the damages, old chap," he said, laughingly, as they advanced into the room; but the laugh faded from his lips as he caught sight of the prostrate figure on the floor.

The man had evidently been trying to crawl to the window, which was open, when the faintness had come over him; and he had fallen against the corner of a chair, cutting his lip open. Little blood had followed the cut; indeed, the poor fellow did not look as though he had much blood left in him to lose.

Dick raised him very gently, and laid him on the hard, comfortless bed.

“ Well, I’m blest,” he murmured, “ who’d ha’ thowt o’ findin’ *him* like this? Get us some brandy, Tom, as quick as you can; and then ye can make some sop, same as the puppies take, ye know, when you’ve to feed ‘em. But this is a rum go anyhow ! ”

“ Do you know him, then ? ” asked the dog-fancier, as he came in with the brandy.

“ Know him ? I should rayther think so, indeed! Why, he completed my eddication, he did—leastways, he would have done, if I hadn’t run away from school, and took to the profession instead! It’s Mr. Cameron, that used to be schoolmaster at Fordham.”

Very carefully and tenderly Dick fanned the flickering flame of life until it grew stronger again; and then sat by the

bedside ; feeding the famished man like a mother her baby, noting meanwhile what a terrible wreck Donald Cameron was. His face—always thin and sallow—looked ghastly now ; great black hollows surrounding the eyes, the Celtic cheekbones hideously prominent, and a week's growth of hair on the face, which had been wont to be kept so closely shaven of old.

When the schoolmaster opened his eyes at last, and saw Dick Hepple bending over him, he must have fancied himself back at Fordham ; for he lost the first strange fear which was in his face ; and, turning over in bed, went to sleep contentedly enough, overcome with weakness.

Then Dick set to work to think what he could do for the man he had found so opportunely. First of all, he peeped into the cupboard. Nothing here but a pinch

of salt and a few used tea-leaves in the little black tea-pot.

Stepping carefully, so as not to awake the sleeper, Dick crept downstairs, and stood at the bottom, counting out the change in his pocket. Then he nodded his head. He had helped Tom Stubbs in a very profitable deal that day, and his friend had given him a liberal commission ; besides, he had been lucky at cards the night before, and won no less than five shillings at a sitting. He was quite in funds, was Dick ! So he went along to old Mother Hopkins' general shop, and bought quite a nice little stock of necessaries, which he placed very neatly in Donald Cameron's empty closet.

“ He never licked me like the first chap—maybe it would hae been better for me if he had though—might have whacked some larnin' into my thick head that way ! But I'm not one to bear a

grudge for that sort o' neglect, I reckon —had none too much on it i' my time."

So said Dick, with a touch of grim humour; and then he went out to think things over.

Poor Mr. Cameron! Who would have thought of him coming down in the world like that! Dick had a great respect for learning, if he had little of it himself; and he could not bear to think of the man he had known looked up to by everybody, lying there utterly forlorn and friendless; dying slowly, and apparently dying hard of nothing but starvation. All at once he slapped his hand on his thigh.

"I've got it now, blest if I haven't. Wonder I didn't think on it afore! And them such friends, too, and him taking such pains to help the young chap on."

For he had just remembered Alick Lisle. Of course, there was the very one to solve the riddle which was puzzling

him. Now he had a double motive for finding the man he had been looking for.

“I'll just drop round that way in the mornin'; maybe I'll catch him this time,” he decided; and then went quietly home, and sat up with the poor schoolmaster all night.

For Donald Cameron was very ill, and the doctor whom Dick had fetched in great haste pronounced it a critical case; and said that nothing but the man's wiry constitution and regular habits of life previously had enabled him to stand the strain so long.

It was, therefore, some days before Dick could leave the bedside to pursue his search; and then only when a kind-hearted neighbour came to his aid.

By a strange piece of luck, however, Dick met the very man he sought long before he got to the publishing office,

and in eager terms began to tell him how he had come upon their schoolmaster.

Alick was shocked by the discovery. He had not heard from Donald Cameron for a long time; and in the increasing interest of his own life, had indeed half-forgotten the man who had done so much to start him in his career.

This selfishness disgusted him now, as a rush of the old friendship came into his heart.

What a self-absorbed egotist he had become! How calmly he had allowed the best friend he ever had to glide away out of his ken, just because there had been a slight absence of sympathy between them on one or two points of theology.

Curse theology; it was always making a brute of him! First his steadfastness in friendship, next his honour in love.

All this he thought very bitterly as he paced along by Dick's side, while the

good-hearted fellow, thinking him rather cold and unresponsive, tried to awaken sympathy by describing what he had heard of Cameron's life from Tom Stubbs the dog-fancier.

In his excitement Dick actually forgot himself and his own concerns so completely, that he never remembered to ask the very question for the sake of which he had been tracking Alick all over London.

END OF VOL. II.









